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GNOSTICISM, TRANSFORMATION, AND THE ROLE OF THE FEMININE IN THE GNOSTIC MASS OF THE ECCLESIA GNOSTICA CATHOLICA (E.G.C.)

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To: Interim Dean Michael R. Heithaus
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DEDICATION

To Thoth

I also dedicate this thesis to my family and friends.

Thank you for your patience and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

GNOSTICISM, TRANSFORMATION, AND THE ROLE OF THE FEMININE IN THE GNOSTIC MASS OF THE ECCLESIA GNOSTICA CATHOLICA (E.G.C.)

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The Gnostic Mass of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (E.G.C.) suggests a heterosexual gender binary in which the female Priestess seated on the altar as the sexual and fertile image of the divine feminine is directed by the male Priest's activity, desire and speech. The apparent contradiction between the empowered individual and the polarized gender role was examined by comparing the ritual symbolism of the feminine with the interpretations of four Priestesses and three Priests (three pairs plus one). Findings suggest that the Priestess' role in the Gnostic Mass is associated with channeling, receptivity, womb, cup, and fertility, while the Priest's role is associated with enthusiasm, activity, phallus, lance, and virility. Despite this strong gender duality, the Priestesses asserted that their role was personally and spiritually empowering, and they maintained that heterosexual and polarized gendered roles are necessary in a transformative ritual which ultimately reveals the godlike unified individual.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Every man and every woman is a star.
Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law*

The central ritual of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (E.G.C.) is the Gnostic Mass, a dramatic performance in which the clergy invoke and convey divine energy to the congregation through the consecration and consumption of the Eucharistic bread and wine. In the Gnostic Mass, the sexuality and fertility of the female Priestess is elevated on the altar but appears to be directed by the male Priest's activity, desire and speech. Literature review and related fieldwork suggest that the Mass may act as an intentional transformative device which creates a systematic change of perception in the participants so that they recognize themselves as wholly divine – as stars, gods or creators with empowered individual will. As part of this dramatic enactment, the seated Priestess is revealed as a representation of the divine feminine, and although it is not required, she is often naked. Although there have been several scholarly books and articles written about Aleister Crowley and the influence of his esoteric order, the Ordo Templi Orientis, in modern esoteric traditions and new religions, there has been relatively little research about their central ritual, the Gnostic Mass. Further, given that the Gnostic Mass focuses on the elevation of the Priestess as conduit for feminine creative energy, there are surprisingly few studies about the role of women in the E.G.C. as co-creators in a ritual which while radically claiming creative power and the divinity of individuals, also reaffirms the female ritual role as attractive, fertile and receptive. The current thesis examines the apparent contradiction between the empowered individual and the polarized

gender role by comparing the ritual liturgy and symbolism with the personal practice and interpretations of the Priestess as they relate to the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass.

The Gnostic Mass: Origins and History

The *Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica* (E.G.C.), also known as the Gnostic Catholic Church, is an appendant body of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), a German occult order founded in 1895. Under Freemason and yoga disciple Carl Kellner (1851-1905), the early O.T.O. combined Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism and Hindu Tantra in sexual rituals designed to unite the divine male and female essences.[1] Possibly influenced by the sexual magic writings of American Rosicrucian Pascal Beverly Randolph, Kellner practiced these rituals in a small inner circle – he as the Babylonian Priest and his wife as the Great Goddess.[2] However, Hugh Urban claims that it was the controversial occultist and co-founder Theodor Reuss (1855-1923) who made the sexual rituals the main focus of the O.T.O., associating Tantric "sexual religion" with the Greek mystery cults and early Christian Gnosticism.[3] According to Reuss, "the secret teachings of the Gnostics (Primitive Christians) are identical with the Vamachari rites of the Tantrics … Phallicism is the basis of all theology and underlies the mythology of all peoples."[4] Reuss established the O.T.O. constitution, designed ten initiatory degrees, and produced

[1] Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 97.

[2] Ibid., 96 and 99.

[3] Ibid., 100.

[4] Reuss, "Parsifal und das Enthüllte Grals-Geheimnis" (1914), reproduced in Peter Koenig, *Der Kleine Theodor Reuss Reader* (Muniche: Arbeitgemeinschaft für Religions- und Weltanschauungsfragen, 1993), translated and quoted in Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 100.

writings which reframed sex magic in terms of pagan symbolism, alchemy and Hermeticism.[5]

Among Theodor Reuss' many esoteric associations, he was also a consecrated bishop in a French Gnostic church.[6] The *Église Gnostique de France* was founded in 1890 by Jules Doinel following a vision in which he was consecrated as "Bishop of Montségur and Primate of the Albigenses."[7] Doinel's church was founded on recurring visions of the divine feminine, the Gnosticism of Simon Magus and Valentinus, the practices of the Cathars, the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church, and the structure of Freemasonry.[8] Churches were administered by a deacon and deaconess, while dioceses were headed by a male bishop and a female sophia, often as a couple.[9] The main sacraments were baptism of the Spirit, public confession and breaking of the bread, rituals derived from the Roman Catholic Mass and Catharism.[10] In 1907, three bishops of Doinel's church – Jean Bricaud, also a bishop in two other Gnostic churches; Gérard Encausse ("Papus"), the founder of the Martinist Order; and Louis-Sophrone Fugairon, an expert in the Cathars and the Templars – developed a version more attractive to the Martinists who were esoteric Christians called the *Église Catholique Gnostique*, later

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[5] Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 101.

[6] According to Crowley biographer Richard Kaczynski, Reuss had connections to the Swedenborgian Rite, the Ancient and Primitive Rite of Memphis-Mizraim, the Martinist Order, Cerneau's Scottish Rite and the Theosophical Society.

[7] Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery: A Primer of Thelemic Ecclesiastical Gnosticism*, No. 2 of *Red Flame: A Thelemic Research Journal*(New York: Ordo Templi Orientis, 1995), 3.

[8] Ibid., 3-5.

[9] Ibid., 17.

[10] Ibid., 18.

renamed *Église Gnostique Universelle*.[11] Although Papus may have consecrated Reuss as a Gnostic bishop as early as 1908, Reuss appears to have been reconsecrated by Bricaud in 1919.[12] During this period, Reuss formed the *Gnostische Katholische Kirche,* which was later renamed the *Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica* (E.G.C.).[13]

By the time Theodor Reuss met him in 1910, British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) was already well advanced in his magical practice. In 1898, Crowley had been initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an esoteric order of ritual magic defined by alchemy, astrology, Kabbalah, tarot and Freemasonry.[14] In the Golden Dawn, Crowley advanced quickly with the help of notable occultists such as George Cecil Jones, Allan Bennett and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers.[15] After financial and sex scandals, and following the schismatic reorganization of the Golden Dawn in 1900, Crowley traveled to Mexico, the United States, France, Ceylon and India.[16] In March of 1904, Crowley and his wife Rose were in Cairo. Following an invocation of Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom, Rose fell into a mediumistic state during which she told Crowley "they were waiting" for him and directed Crowley to write down the

[11] Ibid., 7.

[12] Ibid., 9.

[13] Polyphius gives a date of 1920, but the E.G.C. website lists1918. Tau Polyphilus, "Phylogeny of Modern Gnosticism," Hermetic.com, last accessed September 30, 2014, http://hermetic.com/dionysos/phylo.htm.

[14] Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), Revised and expanded edition, 3.

[15] Nevill Drury, *Stealing Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Modern Western Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 82.

[16] Ibid., 83.

impressions he would receive over a period of three days.[17] Crowley transcribed the dictated communications of Aiwass, a messenger of Horus, which resulted in the *Liber Al vel Legis*, or *The Book of the Law*, the basis of much of Crowley's future work.[18] Crowley was instructed to turn from ceremonial magic and focus instead on sexual magic; specifically, the cosmic union of the feminine principle symbolized as love, the Egyptian goddess Nuit and her representative, the Scarlet Woman, with the masculine principle of life, the Egyptian god Hadit and his representative, the Beast.[19] Crowley's term for this new paradigm, *Thelema* (Greek for "will") is explained in *The Book of the Law*: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the Law, love under will. There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt."[20]

In 1910, Crowley met Theodor Reuss in either London or Berlin and he joined the O.T.O. at the seventh degree, as was the privilege of a 33˚ Scottish Rite Freemason.[21] In 1912, Theodor Reuss visited Crowley to protest Crowley's publication of O.T.O. sex magic secrets in his work *The Book of Lies*. Reuss believed that Crowley referred to the ninth degree of the O.T.O. with these words: "Let the Adept be armed with his Magic Rood and provided with his Mystic Rose ... Let him drink of the Sacrament and let him

[17] Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 126-129.

[18] Drury, *Stealing Fire*, 86.

[19] Ibid., 85.

[20] Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law* (San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser, 1976), 9.

[21] Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 256; Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery: A Primer of Thelemic Ecclesiastical Gnosticism*. No. 2 of Red Flame: A Thelemic Research Journal. (New York: Ordo Templi Orientis, 1995), 10.

communicate the same."[22] After a discussion which apparently clarified why a seventh degree initiate might have ninth degree secrets, Crowley was given the tenth degree and the O.T.O. charter for all of Britain, and it was at this point that he took the ritual name of "Baphomet."[23] In 1913, Crowley wrote *Liber XV*, or the *Gnostic Mass*, which was the "Ritual of the Gnostic Catholic Church … for the use of the O.T.O., the central ceremony of its public and private celebration, corresponding to the Mass of the Roman Catholic Church."[24] Reuss translated *Liber XV* into German and published it under the authority of the O.T.O. in 1918, marking the beginning of Thelema as the official religion of the O.T.O. and naming *Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica* (E.G.C.) as its church.[25]

From 1922 to his death in 1947, Crowley was the second Outer Head of the O.T.O. (after Reuss), deferring only to the Secret Chiefs, or the invisible adepts who directed the order.[26] However, since Crowley is not known to have celebrated the complete Gnostic Mass, it was Wilfred T. Smith (1885-1957) and the other members of the Agapé Lodge in Los Angeles, California who developed many of the current performance standards.[27] From 1933 to 1942, Agapé Lodge celebrated the Gnostic Mass every week with the assistance of Jane Wolfe (1875-1958), who had studied with

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[22] Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Lies* (Ilfracombe: Hayden Press, 1962), quoted in Drury, *Stealing Fire*, 92.

[23] Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 256.

[24] Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery or Mystery*, 11.

[25] "EGC," US Grand Lodge Ordo Templi Orientis, last modified 2014, http://oto-usa.org/oto/egc/.

[26] For Crowley's ongoing deference to the "Secret Chiefs," see Tobias Churton, *Aleister Crowley The Biography: Spiritual Revolutionary, Romantic Explorer, Occult Master – Spy* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2011), 254 and elsewhere.

[27] Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*, 12; Martin P. Starr, *The Unknown God: W.T. Smith and the Thelemites* (Bolingbrook: The Teitan Press, 2003), 190.

Crowley at his magical college, the Abbey of Thelema, in Sicily.[28] From 1942 until the mid-1950s, the Mass was celebrated more sporadically by three groups: the Agapé Lodge members (without Smith), a smaller group which formed around the ousted Smith, and the Swiss O.T.O.[29] The third Outer Head of the O.T.O from 1947 to 1962, Karl Germer (1885-1962), died without a successor and from 1962 to 1969 the ritual was dormant in the United States.[30] Grady McMurtry (1918-1985), known as "Hymenaeus Alpha," became the fourth Outer Head of the Order in 1969 and the Gnostic Mass was celebrated in the United States again in 1977.[31] In 1979, McMurtry established the E.G.C. as a non-profit religious corporation independent of the O.T.O. but his successor, known as "Hymenaeus Beta," reintegrated the E.G.C. with the O.T.O. in 1987 to reconnect the outer ritual of the Gnostic Mass with inner teachings of the O.T.O.[32] In 1991, a new policy required ordained officers of the E.G.C. to be of appropriate rank within the O.T.O. degree system, which limited the impact of the ordinations of other Gnostic churches.[33] The E.G.C. Bishops Helena and Tau Apiryon note that when Thelema replaced Christianity in the E.G.C. in 1913, apostolic succession from that point forward only indicates the lineage of the Prophet of Thelema, or Aleister Crowley.[34]

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[28] Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*, 12.

[29] Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*, 12; Martin P. Starr, *The Unknown God*, 320-322, 333.

[30] Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*, 12.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., 12-13.

[33] Ibid., 13.

[34] Ibid.

Although there are limited sources which focus on the structure, liturgy and interpretations of the Gnostic Mass, three key works inform this thesis: *Liber XV (Ecclesiæ Gnosticæ Catholicæ Canon Missæ);*[35] *Mystery of Mystery: A Primer of Thelemic Ecclesiastical Gnosticism,* also known as *Red Flame: A Thelemic Journal, No. 2* (1995) by Helena and Tau Apiryon; and *To Perfect this Feast: A Performance Commentary on the Gnostic Mass* (3rd edition, 2013) by James and Nancy Wasserman. Since the Gnostic Mass is rooted in the principles and symbols of Thelema, Crowley's *The Book of the Law* (1904; 1938), also known as *Liber AL*, is an essential source of information.[36] A useful resource for definitions and translations is the informal but insightful notes in "The Gnostic Mass: Annotations and Commentary" by Soror Helena and Tau Apiryon. *Sex Magick* (Volume III of *The Best of the Equinox*, 2013), edited by Lon Milo Duquette, gathers additional works by Crowley which provide insight into the Gnostic Mass. In addition, there are at least four Gnostic Mass performance videos or podcasts, each produced by bishops or lodges for the purpose of training and public education. Finally, there are commentaries on the Gnostic Mass in printed publications and in online sources such as the official O.T.O. website (which includes the official E.G.C. webpages), internal O.T.O. journals, and a few privately organized "Thelemic" portals. Although there are many other works by Crowley and O.T.O. members which

[35] See Appendix A. In addition to the original Crowley version of 1913 and the edited and translated Reuss version of 1918, in the 1919 version Crowley returned to the 1913 version but added later material such as the Anthem. Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass: Annotations and Commentary by Helena and Tau Apiryon," The Invisible Basilica of Sabazius, last accessed September 29, 2104, http://hermetic.com/sabazius/gmnotes.htm#credits.

[36] *The Book of the Law* will be referenced hereafter as members prefer with chapter and verse; i.e. *Liber AL* I:3.

might directly or indirectly inform this thesis, they are far beyond the scope of this thesis and will only be mentioned in passing.

While innovation as such is not encouraged and clergy are urged to rely solely on *Liber XV*, performance interpretations such as placement, movement, timing, intonation and music do allow local flexibility.[37] Temporary modifications may be required by space limitations; the necessity of hand-crafting furniture, tools and vestments; the occasional presence of the two "Children;" and laws and customs about alcohol, underage visitors, nudity and public performances.[38] For example, in the O.T.O. journal, *The Equinox* volume III:10 (1990), the serpentine walk of the Priestess is illustrated in two ways, either of which is acceptable.[39] As mentioned before, the Agapé Lodge did a great deal of work from 1933 to 1942 establishing performance standards. In addition, the commentary published in *Mystery of Mystery: A Primer of Thelemic Ecclesiastical Gnosticism* and the webpage "Gnostic Mass Annotations and Commentary," both by Bishops Helena and Tau Apiryon, appear to have been very influential in performance interpretations. In their performance manual, James and Nancy Wasserman (Bishops Tahuti and Mara) have encouraged fine-tuning performance to correct unofficial or localized innovations which appear to conflict with stated instructions or commonly accepted traditional practice.[40] Performance and training videos available online illustrate

[37] James Wasserman and Nancy Wasserman., *To Perfect This Feast: A Performance Commentary on the Gnostic Mass* (n.l: Sekmet Books, 2013), revised 3rd edition, 13-14, 115.

[38] "EGC," US Grand Lodge Ordo Templi Orientis, last modified 2014, http://oto-usa.org/oto/egc/.

[39] Hymenaeus Beta, ed., *The Equinox. Vol. III, No. 10* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1990), 138.

[40] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 9 and 11.

and discuss these various interpretations and podcasts by other bishops and Mass officers provide further explanations.

According to the 2013 Annual Report of the United States Grand Lodge of Ordo Templi Orientis, there are 1,508 active members in the O.T.O. of which 447 are currently Minervals (0º) and 1,061 are "full members."[41] The regional distribution is: 35% West; 25% East; 21% South (including Florida); 12% Other; and 7% Midwest. The United States Grand Lodge publishes three journals and the local bodies publish fourteen additional publications. In addition, the various O.T.O. bodies in the United States – 62 lodges, oases, and camps – offered 1,390 classes on Crowley materials and allied subjects to members and visitors. Although there are seven available degrees, roughly 23% of the membership in 2013 was eligible for ordination as an E.G.C. Priestess or Priest.[42] Although no specific figures are given for the number of active E.G.C. officers, in 2013 there were 838 Gnostic Masses performed and eight new Priests, seven new Priestesses and fifty-two Deacons ordained. These statistics do not include the O.T.O. Grand Lodges of other jurisdictions, such as the United Kingdom Grand Lodge. Although members of these other Grand Lodges contribute meaningfully to this area of research, this thesis will focus predominately on the performance of the Gnostic Mass in the United States.

[41] US Grand Lodge Ordo Templi Orientis, "Ordo Templi Orientis United States Grand Lodge Annual Report Anno IVxxi Fiscal Year 2013," last accessed September 30, 2014, http://oto-usa.org/static/usgl_annual_report_IVxxi.pdf.

[42] According BPt, ordination of the Priestess and the Priest occur in the 4th degree (recorded interview by phone E02, August 2, 2014). However, the number of 4th degree or higher members who are ordained as Priestesses or Priests (active or inactive) is uncertain.

The Gnostic Mass: Temple Layout and Mass Officers

The physical space of the temple is arranged in the image of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life[43] with the altar representing the Supernal Triad, the twenty-two candles representing the paths between the ten emanations of creation and the veil representing the abyss between the lower seven and the upper three.[44] To describe the layout very briefly, the E.G.C. temple is oriented east to west in a long rectangle with the altar and veil at the east end and the veiled tomb at the west end.[45] The north and south sides are for congregational seating, with the entrance for the congregants in the northwest corner. The furnishings are arranged in three downward-pointing triangles with the apexes in the tomb, at the water altar and at the fire altar.[46] The black and white pillars are in the East and to the north and south of the steps, respectively, to suggest Kabbalistic correspondences.[47] The main altar is draped with a red cloth and topped with a narrow, two-shelved Super Altar with the Stélé of Revealing on the top shelf, four candles to each

[43] For Western magicians, the Kabbalistic Tree of Life is a two-dimensional diagram of the ten concentric waves of creation, representing the movement from infinite unity to finite difference. The mystical union sought by many Western esoteric orders is often described in terms of marriage between the higher, more spiritual aspects of creation and the lower, more manifested aspects (or, alternatively, between two undulating forces of expansion and contraction). The Supernal Triad are the three highest emanations and might be said be a trinity in which divine unity is differentiated only by the characteristics of will, life and love. Just as Western Tantra may differ significantly from Eastern Tantra based on interpretations, practices and goals, so does Hermetic Kabbalah differ from Jewish Kabbalah, its source and inspiration. One of the main differences between Hermetic Kabbalah and Jewish Kabbalah is the number and qualities of the feminine which, while very relevant to this thesis, require more explanation than can be given here. See the floor layout diagram in Appendix B.

[44] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass: Annotations and Commentary by Helena and Tau Apiryon," The Invisible Basilica of Sabazius., last Accessed September 29, 2104, http://hermetic.com/sabazius/gmnotes.htm#credits; Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 52.

[45] This orientation appears to be internal and might not reflect terrestrial orientation, depending on the lodge space available.

[46] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 53.

[47] Note: In Agapé Lodge the pillar colors were reversed. Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 54.

side.[48] On the lower shelf is a bracket for *The Book of the Law*, six candles to each side. In front, on the main altar, is the cup, with roses and two large candles to either side. The square fire altar is a black double-cube and holds the censor and incense; the round water altar (the font) holds the water and salt.[49]

In the Gnostic Mass, there are three essential clergy with two additional officers, plus the congregation. The Priest is a male officer and the *Yod* of the Tetragrammaton.[50] He carries the lance which is the Shaft of Light, the *axis mundi* and the instrument of aspiration and potency.[51] According to Crowley, the Priest should be robed as beautifully for the Most High God as "a woman is to her lover" and he is "made God by the passion of God that floodeth him."[52] The Priest represents activity: He speaks, intones, knocks, shouts, and blesses with enthusiasm. He leads the Priestess and kneels to adore the Goddess. He carries, raises and rotates the lance. The Priest's duty is to "administer the Virtues to the Brethren" and he performs much of the service activity at the altar, makes the sacrifice, invokes the Holy Spirit, invites the congregation to participate in

[48] See Appendix C.

[49] *Liber XV*, "Section I: On the Furnishings of the Temple." See Appendix A.

[50] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 6. The Tetragrammaton is thought to indicate the divine name of God, represented by four Hebrew letters, which in some interpretations are associated with divinity as father, mother, son and daughter.

[51] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect this Feast*, 64.

[52] Aleister Crowley, "Not the Life and Adventures of Sir Roger Bloxam," n.s., quoted in Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 6-7.

communion with the divine and blesses the congregation.[53] His recurring death and resurrection is the key initiatory element in the Mass.[54]

The Priestess is a female officer and the first *He* of the Tetragrammaton.[55] She carries the sword which she uses to open the veil of the tomb and release the man. The sword is a symbol of the initiatory power of Iron, or Judgment, by which she designates a Priest.[56] The Priestess represents dual nature: She is both the earthly Babalon and the heavenly Nuit, announcing at her entrance into the Gnostic Mass: "Greeting of Earth and Heaven!"[57] This dual nature is reflected in the alternating nature of her role through the ritual. She appears active as the creator sacred space and the initiator of the man, passive (receptive) as the Priest's consort, active again as the Goddess inviting her lover from behind the veil, passive (helping) during the consecration of the vessels and elements, active again as the holy bride who participates in consummation, and passive (silent) yet again during the communion.[58] Although the Priestess comes into the ritual already prepared as a dedicant and representative of the feminine, she is validated as Priestess and initiator by the acceptance of the congregation and then as partner and conduit by the acceptance of the Priest. Once she has been seated on the altar, divine energy is invoked

[53] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 38; Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 105.

[54] According to NLPs, research interview D02.

[55] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 7.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 11. Note that the greeting is singular.

[58] The word "passive" is inadequate to describe deliberate performance. It can mean receptive, obedient, responsive, helping, brooding, silent, observant, limiting, internal, etc. Obviously, the word "active" is also inadequate; however, it might mean activating, moving, directing, expanding, creating, speaking, etc.

and the veil is drawn aside, the Priestess is typically naked, although this is not required. After communion, the veil is closed and she stays seated on the altar until after the ritual is completed and the congregants have left the temple.

The Deacon may be either a male or female officer but is considered androgynous, a representation of the union of opposites.[59] The Deacon is the bearer of *The Book of the Law*, the opener, narrator, and closer of the Mass, the instructor of the congregation, the support of the Priest and the Priestess, and the Vau in the Tetragrammaton.[60] The Deacon preserves the authority, lineage and form of the Gnostic Mass by proclaiming the Collects, or the eleven short prayers to the deities, saints and principles which give strength to the ritual.[61] Although he moves around freely below the veil, or altar curtain, his position is normally at the center of the center triangle.[62] If a disturbance occurs during the Mass, the Deacon responds to resolve any problems.[63] Helena and Tau Apiryon associate the Deacon with the Egyptian god Tehuti (Thoth) and the teacher/guide Aiwass.[64] Although a Priest and a Priestess might practice their parts privately without a Deacon, the Gnostic Mass cannot be fully performed privately or publicly without a Deacon.

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[59] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 8. However, in the liturgy, the Deacon is called "he."

[60] Ibid.; Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*, 42-45 and Chapter 8.

[61] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 32.

[62] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 57.

[63] According to EPs, recorded interview by phone A02, February 8, 2014.

[64] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 8.

The two Children who assist the Priestess and the Priest are considered optional officers by some, but Helena and Tau Apiryon note that Crowley does not indicate that the positions are optional.[65] Although they are called Children and should be minors, if available, they can be of any age; however, as the children of the supernal Mother they are nongendered but polarized.[66] In practice, they may be referred to by gendered pronouns, "he" for the Positive Child and "she" for the Negative Child," but this is merely a label of convenience.[67] At rest, the Negative Child wearing black stands on the north side of the temple and holds the water and salt (water and earth); the Positive Child wearing white stands on the south side of the temple and holds the censor and incense (fire and air). When assisting the Priestess to purify the Priest, they are in the West; when assisting the Priest to purify the Priestess, they are in the East. They also offer the wine and the cakes of the Eucharist to the congregation as they file past the altar. Together, they are the final *He* in the Tetragrammaton and represent the Egyptian child Heru Ra Ha.[68] According to Helena and Tau Apiryon, Heru Ra Ha is a two-natured child, called Harpocrates when negative and Horus when positive.[69] The association of the two Children with the Kabbalistic black and white pillars suggests they have polarized attributes: The Negative Child is restraining and the Positive Child is expansive.

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.; Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 21n.

[67] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 21. However, there may be some gender preference in performance since in all eight of the observed Masses with Children, the negative Child was female and the positive Child was male.

[68] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 8.

[69] Ibid.

The congregation includes members of the church, family and visitors, and is required for the fully-realized celebration of the Gnostic Mass, even if only one person attends.[70] The congregation helps open the temple by proclaiming the Creed and greeting the Priestess. They participate in the Mass by speaking, standing, kneeling, and striking their breast. They respond to the words and actions of the Priest, and accept the "virtues" of the communion.[71] The members of the congregation consume consecrated cookies called Cakes of Light, but may choose consecrated grape juice over wine, if necessary.[72] Although the cookies and the wine are not the same as the host or the wine consumed by the Priest, the Cakes of Light (but not the wine) may contain physical elements contributed by either or both of the Priest and the Priestess.[73] The core activity in the Gnostic Mass is the celebration of the sacred union of these elements; however, although the Priest and Priestess "imagine and inspire" the method, the congregation as "of the

[70] Crowley's liturgical instructions regarding the Priestess' greeting, the officers' interactions with the congregation, the People's refrains and gestures, and the Priest's blessing indicate this; however, Effertz notes that a Mass might still be considered official even if "the congregation is vacant." This is a significant exception, since it would imply that gender roles are not performed for the sake of the congregation's recognition or understanding. Michael Effertz, *Priest/less: In Advocacy of Queer Gnostic Mass* (West Hollywood, CA: Luxor Media Group, 2012), 20.

[71] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 38.

[72] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 18.

[73] The Cakes of Light are primarily wheat flour, reduced port, a drop of Abramelin Oil, with a minute amount of previously prepared desiccated blood (menses or finger-pricked), or semen and/or menses, or the combined post-coitus fluids, then baked, but individual interpretations of the personal ingredients appear to vary widely. Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 18 and 124; *Liber AL* III:23-24; Drury, *Stealing Fire*, 89-100; and Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002), 292.

Gods" themselves must actualize their own transmutations through "internal alchemy".[74] To understand how this is accomplished, a brief summary of the Gnostic Mass follows.[75]

The Gnostic Mass: An Interpretation of the Ritual

The Gnostic Mass begins. The congregation comes in barefoot and sits quietly. The Deacon dressed in white and yellow greets the congregation, then opens *The Book of the Law* ceremoniously and places it on the Super Altar. The Creed is spoken in unison by the Deacon and the congregation. From the southwest, the Child in black enters with the water and salt, followed by the Priestess dressed in blue and gold, with a red girdle holding the sword. She carries the paten and is followed by the positive Child in white with censor and incense. The Priestess proclaims the greeting and then places the paten (which holds a wafer) on the altar before the covered Cup of Babalon.[76] She circumambulates in a serpentine pattern around the fire and water altars, the Children with her. In front of the tomb, she draws her sword and parts the veil with the command: Arise! A man emerges from the tomb with the lance (a staff his height) in hand. With the elements of salty water (water and earth) and with burning incense (fire and air), the Priestess purifies and consecrates him; with the Scarlet Robe and Serpent Crown, she clothes him. Kneeling, she adores the lance by running her hands up and down it.

Taking the Priestess' hand, the newly-made Priest raises her and leads her to the East to enthrone her on the altar. She holds *The Book of the Law* open on her breast as the Priest purifies and consecrates her with the elements. He kisses the Book and closes the

[74] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 37.

[75] From observation. For the complete ritual, please see Appendix A.

[76] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 34.

veil over the altar. After circumambulating the temple, he returns to the East. Through the veil, the Priest and Priestess speak to each other of love and longing in the evocative words of *The Book of the Law*, she as Nuit and he as Hadit. He parts the veil and the embodied divinity is visible as the Priestess, either clothed or unclothed depending on her comfort or the circumstances.[77] The Priest kneels and kisses her knees as she cradles the lance. They remain in this position while the Deacon recites the Collects, or the principles of Thelema.

The Priest then consecrates the host and the cup with a pattern of crosses made with his thumb tucked between his index and middle finger, while the Priestess helps by offering or holding the cup and the paten as needed. The Priest pauses significantly to adore the divinity in the moment, in the Priestess and in himself. As he elevates the host and the cup, a bell sounds. He returns the host to the Priestess and proclaims the Anthem, or the invocation of energy, in profound tones. The union of the Priest-Lord and the Priestess-Lady is mystically consummated with the immersion of the host into the cup. He blesses the congregation and consumes the host and the wine, announcing emphatically: "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods."[78] The Priest turns back to face to the Priestess while the congregation receives the consecrated Cakes of Light and wine. After the congregrants have each made their proclamations, the Priest closes the altar veil and returns to the tomb. The Deacon closes the tomb veil and the Gnostic Mass is concluded. The congregation leaves in silence.

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[77] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 82.

[78] *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements."

The Work of the Priestess: West and East

The dual role of the Priestess requires additional explanation since the action of the Mass pivots at the moment of her role-change. The congregation first sees the Virgin clothed in blue and gold, wearing the sword in a red girdle, and attended by the Children. After she announces "Greeting of Earth and Heaven," the Deacon and congregation recognize her as the Priestess and respond with a hailing sign.[79] Until this moment, the speaking role of the Priestess is labeled "the Virgin" in the liturgy; in *Liber XV*, Crowley states that she "should be actually Virgo Intacta, or specially dedicated to the service of the Great Order."[80] The Priestess provides four services which correspond to four transformations within the Gnostic Mass: raising of the Priest; opening the veil; consecrating the elements of the Eucharist with the Priest; and the union/communion.[81] The first transformation occurs in the West and represents the activity of a fully human person; the other transformations in the East represent the activity of a medium embodying or reflecting divinity.

What is the first work of the Priestess? To raise the Priest. With her winding, serpentine path through and around the fire and water altars, she creates and energizes sacred space.[82] Crowley describes this path as three and a half circles of the temple, from in front of the main altar then clockwise past the fire altar, counterclockwise about font,

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[79] Wassermann, *To Perfect This Feast*, 29; According to Tau Apiryon and Helena, this hailing sign is the public version of the Hailing Sign of a Magician (II° O.T.O.), by which the congregation signals their intention of participating appropriately in willful union. Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 11.

[80] *Liber XV*, "II: Of the Officers of the Mass."; note that the Priest-role is not labeled "Man" prior to his initiation.

[81] *Liber XV*: Sections III, IV, VI, and VIII.

[82] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 7.

clockwise around both fire altar and font, then counterclockwise around fire altar to the tomb in the West.[83] Tau Apiryon compares this movement to the Kundalini coiled three and a half times around the base of the spine.[84] In front of the tomb in the West, the Priestess draws the sword and opens the tomb veil. The man steps out of the tomb, not yet a Priest, acknowledging: "I am a man among men … How should I be worthy to administer the virtues to the Brethren?"[85] The Priestess purifies him with salt water and fortifies him with sweet-burning incense.[86] She clothes him with his Robe and says: "Be the flame of the Sun thine ambience, O thou PRIEST of the SUN!"[87] She crowns him with the Uraenus Serpent crown and says: "Be the Serpent thy crown, O thou PRIEST of the LORD!"[88] The Priestess kneels before the Priest and strokes the lance up and down erotically eleven times, then says: "Be the LORD present among us!"[89] The congregation, now labeled "the People," affirms her declarations, saying: "So mote it be."

What is the second work of the Priestess? To embody, reflect or inspire divinity. The Priest now proclaims, "Thee therefore whom we adore we also invoke."[90] The People acknowledge this with the hailing sign, a gesture of acceptance and respect. The Priest takes the Priestess' hand and lifts her out of her kneeling position, guides her to sit

[83] See Appendix B for diagram of the serpentine path. *Liber XV*: "III: Of the Ceremony of the Introit."

[84] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 13.

[85] *Liber XV*: "III: Of the Ceremony of the Introit."

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] *Liber XV*: "IV: Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil."

upon the altar, saying: "I, Priest and King, take thee, Virgin pure without spot; I upraise thee; I lead thee to the East; I set thee upon the summit of the Earth."[91] By naming her Virgin and leading her, the Priest assumes the active role and claims "the power of the lifted lance."[92] During the enthronement ritual, she holds *The Book of the Law* to her chest with her fingers in a downward triangle, symbolizing the presence of the Word in her heart and of the feminine energy of Shakti.[93] He purifies her with the elements, circumambulates the temple clockwise around both fire altar and font three times, returns to the main altar and then draws the veil across the altar. As the Priest advances up the altar steps, his speeches indicate his transforming perspective: Behind the veil, divinity is not only Love, but also Life and Will.[94]

Behind the Veil: Mystery of Mystery

On the first step of the altar, the Priest addresses the divine behind the veil as "O circle of stars," "Queen of Space" and "O Nuit," claiming that only in the image of Love can the infinite be understood.[95] Now naked behind the veil, she responds in passionate tones: "To love me is better than all things … Put on the wings, arouse the coiled splendour within you: come unto me! … I love you! I am the blue-lidded daughter of sunset; I am the naked brilliance of the voluptuous night-sky. To me! To me!"[96]

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] *Liber XV*: "IV: Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil;" Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 17.

[94] A nonlocal Thelemite, personal phone conversation with author, November, 2013.

[95] *Liber XV*: "IV: Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil."

[96] Ibid.; Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 79.

Advancing a second step, the Priest commandingly addresses the divine behind the veil from his new perspective: "O secret of secrets that art hidden in the being of all that lives … I am the flame that burns in the heart of every man, and in the core of every star. I am Life, and the giver of Life, yet therefore is the knowledge of me the knowledge of death." [97] The Deacon and the People respond by joyfully recognizing the fulcrum between fire and water, life and death, day and night; the Equinox of the Gods, the death of old gods and the birth of new.[98] The Priest mounts the third step of the altar, and says: "Thou that art One, our Lord in the Universe the Sun, our Lord in ourselves whose name is Mystery of Mystery …" [99] A voice beyond the veil responds: "There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt."[100] With this understanding, the Priest dares to part the veil and sees the revealed Priestess seated with the paten (with host) in her right hand and the cup in her left, arms upraised.[101] He greets her image with solar and phallic god-names, presumably acknowledging their presence or attributes in himself. He offers her the lance, which she kisses eleven times, and then holds it upright with her legs as he falls to his knees and adores her.[102]

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[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid., originally from *Liber AL* II:35-44; Note that this is also considered a biographical sketch of Crowley, Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 20-22.

[99] *Liber XV*: "IV: Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil."

[100] Ibid.

[101] This pose is "characteristic of a nourishment goddess." Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 84. From this point forward, the Priestess will be naked unless she chose to rerobe before the Priest drew back the veil. Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 23.

[102] According to James Wasserman and Nancy Wasserman, when the Priest offers her the lance, she holds it upright between her breasts with her legs so that she forms the bisexual image of Baphomet. Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 85.

The remaining ritual amplifies the Priest's steps towards divine awareness in terms of sacred union and the creation of a divine child. In the Consecration of the Elements, and during the transmutation of the earthly bread and wine into the Body and Blood, the speech and actions of the Priest entwine multiple metaphors. The earthly host is described as the "life of man upon earth, fruit of labour, sustenance of endeavor;" the earthly wine is "vehicle of joy of man upon earth, solace of labour, inspiration of endeavor."[103] The Priest consecrates the host and wine into the "Body and Blood of God" by "virtue of the Rod."[104] In Greek, the Priest proclaims: "This is my Body … This is the Cup of my Blood."[105] He makes five crosses over the Priestess as she holds the paten and the cup with half-raised arms, and then says: "Accept, O LORD, this sacrifice of life and joy, true warrants of the Covenant of Resurrection."[106] At this point, Crowley instructs: "The Priest offers the Lance to the Priestess, who kisses it; he then touches her between the breasts and upon the body. He then flings out his arms upward, as comprehending the whole shrine."[107] The Priest makes the offering to "our Lord and Father the Sun that travelleth over the Heavens in his name ON," kissing the Priestess and making crosses

[103] *Liber XV*: "VI: Of the Consecration of the Elements."

[104] Ibid. Note that liturgy instructions use word "Lance", but the priest says "Rod."

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

over himself.[108] He elevates the host and cup, the bell rings, and he intones "Holy, Holy, Holy, IAÔ."[109] In awe, the Priest declares:

> Thou, who art I, beyond all I am,
> Who hast no nature and no name,
> Who art, when all but Thou are gone,
> Thou, centre and secret of the Sun,
> Thou, hidden spring of all things known
> And unknown, Thou aloof, alone,
> Thou, the true fire within the reed
> Brooding and breeding, source and seed
> Of life, love, liberty, and light,
> Thou beyond speech and beyond sight,
> Thee I invoke, my faint fresh fire
> Kindling as mine intents aspire.
> Thee I invoke, abiding one,
> Thee, centre and secret of the Sun,
> And that most holy mystery
> Of which the vehicle am I!
> Appear, most awful and most mild,
> As is lawful, in thy child![110]

In the last ritual movement of the Gnostic Mass, the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements, the Priest and Priestess together immerse the host in the wine in a holy and willful act of union – union between themselves and between the Lord and Lady. Together, they hold the lance and cup so that a particle of the host is immersed in the wine on the head of the lance.[111] They intone a word HRILIU, which is described

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid. Greek, IAÔ is abbreviation for IAÔ SABAÔ associated with the Gnostic name for Abraxas and/or Meithras. Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 23.

[110] *Liber XV*: "VII: Of the Office of the Anthem."

[111] *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements." To accomplish this, the Priestess must actively guide the Lance point because the Priest is holding the particle in place at the point. In his left and her right, they hold the cup together. His right hand holds the particle, her left guides the Lance. Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 110.

as the cry of a dove or a hawk in orgasm.[112] Helena and Tau Apiryon explain the Commixto: "The Particle plunged into the Wine represents the Union of Hadit and Nuit, the dissolution of the King, the "Baptism of Wisdom," and the casting of the last drop of blood into the Cup of Babalon. It is both the process of incarnation and of illumination."[113] The Priest strikes his breast and says, "O Lion and O Serpent that destroy the destroyer, be mighty among us."[114] He then turns to the People and, after making a temple-encompassing equal-armed cross, proclaims, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law."[115] The People respond, "Love is the law, love under will."[116] The Priest faces the altar again, and the Priestess offers him the paten. The Priest consumes the broken prices of host not used in the immersion and says, "In my mouth be the essence of the Sun!" The Priestess offers him the cup, he drinks and says, "In my mouth be the essence of the joy on earth!" After a moment of silence, the Priest turns to the People and, while looking at the Deacon, announces: "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods."[117]

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[112] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 110.

[113] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 34.

[114] *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements." Helena and Tau Apiryon note: "The Elements being conjoined within the Cup, the Lion and Serpent are called to manifest therein. The Lion is Meithras, the Serpent is Abraxas. Together, they became Chnoubis, the Agathadaimon, the Great Magical Agent: Azoth, Baphomet, Kundalini, Shakti. The Destroyer is that which imposes limitations. That which destroys the Destroyer is Babylon, ecstasy of experience." Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 36.

[115] *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements." This reconfirms and responds to the words of the voice behind the Veil earlier.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid. Tau Apiryon notes that this is a phrase from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and could be translated as "There is no member of mine devoid of a God." Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 36.

The Priest turns back to face the Priestess while the People communicate and make their own proclamations. Like the Children and the Deacon, the Priestess does not partake of the Communion.[118] To explain this, Helena and Tau Apiryon suggest that while the Priest symbolizes a mortal, physical individual, the other officers represent aspects in every man and woman which do not require physical nourishment; however, they also stress that the Gnostic Mass is not simply a magical operation in which the Priest acts upon passive matter with the assistance of servants.[119] After the last communicant has completed his or her proclamation, the Priest closes the veil with the Priestess inside. The Priest blesses the People and returns to the tomb. The Deacon closes the tomb veil and announces the end of the Gnostic Mass. The People file outside silently. Both the Priest and Priestess remain enclosed behind their veils until the temple has emptied of everyone but the officers. Although they are both still in liminal space, the Priest has returned from whence he came while the Priestess has remained on the altar. When the officers feel reacclimated to a mundane state, the Deacon releases the Priest from the tomb by opening the curtain and the Priest in turn opens the altar veil and assists the Priestess down.[120] After the officers are redressed in street clothes and the temple is returned to a resting or public state, the congregation is readmitted to allow conversation and visiting.

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[118] As per ritual instructions. *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements."

[119] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 7, 39.

[120] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 120.

Every Man and Every Woman Is A Star

To understand the format and intention of the Gnostic Mass, one might turn to *The Book of the Law* which reveals the mythos of Thelema, as dictated by the discarnate teacher Aiwass to Aleister Crowley in 1904.[121] According to Crowley's preface, the book explains the universe in three parts: Nuit (space, possibility), Hadit (point, experience) and Horus (the New Aeon, or astrological age).[122] The Thelemic Nuit is symbolized as the Egyptian goddess Nuit, the starry night sky who bends over like an arch; Hadit is depicted as a winged globe at her heart and is also at the center of every star.[123] The phrase "Every man and every woman is a star" indicates that each person is a star which, although it has its own aggregate experiences, eventually participates in the total universe of experience.[124] The Law of Thelema – "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the law, love under will. There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt" – is the ethical obligation to consciously unite with the experiences necessary for the full development of the star-nature.[125] While all experiences are permitted and even

[121] Although the correspondences between *The Book of the Law* and the Gnostic Mass are significant, intentional and meaningful, there appear to be difficulties in attributing Part III (Horus and the New Aeon) to elements in the Gnostic Mass. Many writers do not make a comparison: In *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (2005), Joshua Gunn critically examines *The Book of the Law* from an "intrinsic approach" and does not refer to the Gnostic Mass. In contrast, Michael Effertz in *Priest/less: in Advocacy of Queer Gnostic Mass* (2012) only refers to *The Book of the Law* indirectly through commentaries. One of the interviewees (NLPs) explained that an injunction against discussion of *The Book of the Law* by members is found in the Comment at the end: "Those who discuss the contents of this Book are to be shunned by all, as centres of pestilence. All questions of the Law are to be decided only by appeal to my [Crowley's] writings, each for himself."

[122] *Liber AL* Introduction: I-IV.

[123] *Liber AL* II:6. Note that allegory details do not necessarily follow known Egyptian myths.

[124] *Liber AL* Introduction: 7, 9.

[125] Ibid., 9.

necessary, in each particular situation a person must choose experience that is both expansive and unifying.[126] In Crowley's interpretation, the New Aeon began in 1904 with the dictation of *The Book of the Law* and is symbolized by the enthroned (seated) Egyptian hawk-headed god Horus.[127] Following the previous eras of the mother/matriarchy (Isis) and of the father/patriarchy (Osiris), the era of the child (Horus) is associated with the maturation of the individual will as a balance between love and law.[128] For Crowley, the age of Horus is a bitter and violent struggle between the governed childish masses and the individualism of genius; the Great Work is the struggle to preserve and promote individual liberty.[129]

In the dictated text of *The Book of the Law*, three sections correspond to speeches by Nuit, Hadit and Horus in which they address not only each other but Crowley himself as the prophet-Priest-scribe. Nuit is Heaven, the Queen of Space, continuous but divided in two for the sake of love and the joy of union; the world is her little sister, her heart and her tongue.[130] Thus in the Gnostic Mass, the Priestess gives a single greeting of Heaven and Earth to the congregation; in her dual role, she speaks longingly to Hadit from behind the veil using the words of Nuit and also acts as the earthly bride to the Priest in the mystic marriage. While Nuit is described in terms of love, beauty and the starry sky,

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[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid., 12.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid., 15.

[130] *Liber AL* I:29, 53.

Hadit is described as life, the knowledge of death, and the serpent.[131] Facing the Priestess, the Priest as Hadit experiences Heaven as unity and Earth as union: "I am the secret Serpent coiled about to spring: in my coiling there is joy. If I lift up my head, I and my Nuit are one. If I droop down mine head, and shoot forth venom, then is rapture of the earth, and I and the earth are one."[132] While the Priestess is acting on behalf of Heaven and Earth, is she a star? Perhaps not: In *The Book of the Law*, Nuit herself is infinite space and the infinite stars, continuous, in which nothing is differentiated.[133] As the world, Nuit's "little sister" is regenerated by love, the gift of Nuit's kiss passed through the ardours (passions) of Hadit.[134] Within the Gnostic Mass, the Priestess appears to be the representative of the divine feminine reflected in two halves – infinity and manifestation – and thus is not acting on behalf of herself as an individual or a woman.[135]

Nonetheless, according to *The Book of the Law*, it is a woman who performs the Thelemic rituals of Nuit and Hadit with the prophet. For starry Nuit (Part I), the Priestess is called the Scarlet Woman when paired with the Beast, who is the priest of infinite space.[136] Together, each a star with a serpent on their brow and with Nuit bending down to them, they gather followers and propagate Thelema.[137] While they have

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[131] *Liber AL* I:61; *Liber AL* II:6, 22.

[132] *Liber AL* II:26.

[133] *Liber AL* I:22.

[134] *Liber AL* I:14, 53.

[135] Since the Gnostic Mass was not written until 1913, the ritual and rituals referred to in *The Book of the Law* (1904) are unspecified Thelemic rituals of adoration and initiation; however, the Priestess and the Priest give many of Nuit and Hadit's speeches verbatim in the Gnostic Mass.

[136] *Liber AL* I:15.

[137] *Liber AL* I:15, 18-19.

complementary performative roles, their roles in ritual are exclusive and nontransferable: "For he is ever a sun, and she a moon. But to him is the winged secret flame, and to her the stooping starlight."[138] For the serpent Hadit (Part II), the servants of "the Star & the Snake" are the chosen who experience "beauty and strength, leaping laughter and delicious languor, force and fire."[139] The women of Hadit's chosen are described as "magnificent beasts … with large limbs, and fire and light in their eyes, and masses of flaming hair about them" who rule, fight victoriously and live joyously.[140] Both the bride of Hadit (Babalon, as the manifestation of Nuit) and the bride of Prophet (Crowley's wife Rose, as the Scarlet Woman) are not the veiled, modest women associated with sorrow and death but women who both love and lust with burning hearts.[141]

For the warrior Horus (Part III), the Scarlet Woman who is true to the New Aeon is "girt with a sword" – willful, heartless, loud, adulterous and shameless.[142] By following the way of Horus, she will achieve power and self-knowledge, as the self-aware human partner of a god-man and the mother of the divine child: "Then will I lift her to pinnacles of power: then I will breed from her a child mightier than all the kings of the earth. I will fill her with joy: with my force shall she see & strike at the worship of Nu: she shall achieve Hadit."[143] Although it may appear that the Scarlet Woman is primarily the mother of a divine child, another interpretation might suggest that the

[138] *Liber AL* I:16.

[139] *Liber AL* II:21.

[140] *Liber AL* II:24.

[141] *Liber AL* II:24, 52.

[142] *Liber AL* III:11, 44.

[143] *Liber AL* III:45. Note: Nu = Nuit.

Scarlet Woman is initiated by Horus and becomes herself a star-child, achieving self-will as Hadit and abandoning her role as a reflection of heavenly Nuit (but perhaps not her reflection of the earthy Babalon). Horus is the exemplar and ruler for the modern era of innocent individuals who willfully choose experience over conformity in the task of unveiling personal genius – the explorers, the artists and the mythmakers.[144] However, although "all men and women are invited to co-operate with the Master Therion [Crowley] in this, the Great Work," the price of initiation for the Scarlet Woman is irrevocable commitment to the work of Horus, subject to dire penalties specific to her alone:

> Let the Scarlet Woman beware! If pity and compassion and tenderness visit her heart; if she leave my work to toy with old sweetnesses; then shall my vengeance be known. I will slay me her child: I will alienate her heart: I will cast her out from men: as a shrinking and despised harlot shall she crawl through dusk wet streets, and die cold and an-hungered.[145]

While there are many similarities between the Scarlet Woman of *The Book of the Law* and the Priestess of the Gnostic Mass as indicated by the use of the same speeches and descriptors, two factors seem to prohibit direct correlation. First, the Scarlet Woman is the title of Crowley's consecrated partner in his role as the Beast, not a general title for female partners in magical rituals.[146] Second, the term "Scarlet Woman" is not used in the

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[144] *Liber AL* Introduction: IV.

[145] Ibid.; *Liber AL* III:43.

[146] However, in Crowley's "old" comment on *Liber AL* I:15, he says, "I am inclined, however, to believe that "the Beast" and "the Scarlet Woman" do not denote persons, but are titles of office, that of Hierophant and High Priestess (Vau and Gimel)…" In the later "new" comment, he states the currently held position, "It is necessary to say here that The Beast appears to be a definite individual; to wit, the man Aleister Crowley. But the Scarlet Woman is an officer replaceable as need arises." Aleister Crowley, "The New and Old Commentaries to Liber AL vel Legis, The Book of the Law," Hermetic.com. Last Accessed September 30, 2014, http://hermetic.com/legis/new-comment/, comments for *Liber AL* I:15.

Gnostic Mass, even though the Priestess also appears to act on behalf of Nuit and Babalon. That Babalon is the little sister of Nuit, and the womb of the manifested and manifesting world, might be indicated by the Creed in the prelude of the Gnostic Mass which states: "And I believe in one Earth, the Mother of us all, and in one Womb, wherein all men are begotten, and wherein they shall rest, Mystery of Mystery, in Her name BABALON."[147] Although the Priestess is herself the consecrated Virgin and is seated on the altar, the "summit of the Earth," it appears that as a representative of Babalon she is the heart of the earth, the gate and the womb.[148] In the Office of the Collects, the Sun, the Moon and Earth seem to refer to the planetary beings. The earth is the womb itself, and may perhaps be associated with nature:

> Mother of fertility on whose breast lieth water, whose cheek is caressed by air, and in whose heart is the sun's fire, womb of all life, recurring grace of seasons, answer favorably the prayer of labour, and to pastors and husbandmen be thou propitious.[149]

On the other hand, the Lady in the Collects is addressed by the Deacon as "giver and receiver of joy, gate of life and love, be thou ever ready, thou and thine handmaiden, in thine office of gladness."[150] She is the partner of the Lord who is addressed as "secret and most holy, source of light, source of life, source of love, source of liberty, be thou ever

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[147] *Liber XV*: "III: On the Ceremony of the Introit."

[148] *Liber XV*: "II: Of the Officers of the Mass: Priestess" and "III: Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil."

[149] *Liber XV*: "V: Of the Office of the Collects Which Are Eleven In Number: Earth."

[150] *Liber XV*: "V: Of the Office of the Collects Which Are Eleven In Number: Lady:" Aleister Crowley, with Mary Desti and Leila Waddell., *Magick: Liber ABA, Book 4, Parts I-IV*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser, 1997). 517.

constant and might within us, force of energy, fire of motion."[151] Her office of gladness is the role of the Priestess in the Mystic Marriage, or Consummation of Elements, which results in the divine child. Just as the Scarlet Woman is the Whore of Babalon who achieves divine selfhood through dedication to the work of the New Aeon with Crowley, so too is the Priestess the consecrated Virgin of the Lady who performs the Mystic Marriage with the Priest to communicate the essence of this divine selfhood – the realization that "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods" – to the congregation.

Gnosticism and Enthusiasm in the Gnostic Mass

Although the *Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica* (E.G.C.), or the Gnostic Catholic Church, is the religious body of the O.T.O. and the Gnostic Mass is the public ritual of Thelema, it is not at all clear what type of Gnosticism is intended. Current debate about Gnosticism as a category suggests that even historical forms of Gnosticism have few characteristics in common. Hans Jonas proposes that the key element in Gnosticism is separation or alienation from a remote divinity which is contrasted with the physical, with nature and with human experience, thought to be incomplete, gross or illusionary.[152] Attempts to explain the created world lead to a variety of beliefs about a flawed or rebellious creator god who is the ruler of this world. Those who recognize, identify with or honor this idea of the creator, called in some cases the Demiurge, include those Hellenistic or Christian sects which were labelled "heretical" by the Roman Catholic Church. While links of historical continuation between early sects such as those of Simon

[151] *Liber XV*: "V: Of the Office of the Collects Which Are Eleven In Number: Lord."

[152] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God & the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 3rd edition.

Magus, Valentinus, Marcion or Mani and the revival sects of the medieval period such as the Bogomiles or the Cathars have not been demonstrated, a modern wave of Gnostic revival developed in Hermeticism, nihilism, and transcendentalism which combined elements of those earlier sects as interpreted from available documents.[153] As Ioan P. Couliano and Michael Allen Williams have argued, the term "Gnosticism" has broadened through adaptation so expansively that the category now has little meaning.[154] In particular, three subcategories of Gnosticism previously proposed have been largely abandoned by scholars, if not by practitioners: "Ascetic" tendencies which deny the physical in favor of the spiritual, "libertine" tendencies which celebrate the created world and human life, and "mystical" tendencies which claim union with a transcendent but knowable divine reality. Nonetheless, the terms "gnosis" and "gnostic" might still indicate the state of mind or practices of groups which may not be clearly linked to historical Gnosticism but have similar views or beliefs, where "gnosis" is the certain knowledge of divinity experienced during mystical union and "gnostic" might be applied to symbol, myth, ritual or doctrine which describes or leads to such experiences.[155] Several scholars have made connections between the Gnosticism of medieval sects (Christian and non-Christian) and the gnosis of nineteenth century esoteric schools such

[153] Roelf Van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, eds., *Gnosis and Hermeticism From Antiquity to Modern* Times (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[154] Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) , translated by H. S. Weisner, and Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[155] Roelf Van den Broek, "Sexuality and Sexual Symbolism in Hermetic and Gnostic Thought and Practice (Second-Fourth Centuries)," in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011),.edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaf and Jeffrey J. Kripal, 2.

as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn through the work of Jacob Böhme, Emanuel Swedenborg and William Blake.[156]

While it is commonly recognized that the Gnostic Mass of the E.G.C. is not a survival remnant of an historical Gnostic ritual, it has been influenced by similar beliefs and practices. In his history of the French Gnostic Churches, Tau Apiryon, Bishop of the E.G.C., notes that the Eucharistic ritual did not originate with Christianity but earlier "pagan" practices in which a totem or hero is identified with divinity, sacrificed and consumed as way to merge with Spirit: "By integrating the body of their God into the fabric of their own individual bodies, they effected the integration of the Spirit of God into the fabric of their own individual Spirit."[157] According to Tau Apiryon, this bloody sacrifice and communion was eventually replaced with cakes of meal and honey in the Orphic traditions which influenced Hellenistic and non-Christian Gnosticism, including the Manicheans and the Cathars.[158] The "Hermetic Gnosis" (defined as allegorical alchemy), Jewish Qabalism [*sic*], and "the unorthodox Christianity of the Knights Templar" developed during the medieval period and became the basis of esoteric movements such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry.[159] The French Gnostic revival in the late nineteenth century channeled this "confluence of numerous Gnostic streams" into independent Gnostic churches which included several elements associated with historical Gnosticism: The divine feminine, sometimes named Sophia, Helena, Ennoia or Barbêlô,

[156] Roelf Van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, eds. *Gnosis and Hermeticism From Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[157] Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*, 28.

[158] Ibid., 29.

[159] Ibid., 30.

who is simultaneously the Holy Spirit (Paraclete), the Mother and the Bride; the system of emanations by which creative force was given form; the Valentinian distinctions of Hylics, Pneumatics and Psychics; the pairing of male bishops and female sophias; and the communal sacrificial meal.[160] According to Tau Apiryon, the breaking of the bread, or the communal meal, of the French Gnostic churches was modelled on the Cathar ceremony in which a white-draped table with the Gospel of Saint John in Greek stands in place of an altar.[161] In the French Gnostic Eucharist, women wearing white veils and men in white sashes receive the consecrated bread and wine in the name of the Eon Jesus, also called the Christ, after which they all sing in French:

> Hail, hail kingdom
> Of eternal brightness
> Hail, hail Pleroma
> Of the Divinity!
> Abyss, o immense sea
> Where matter is set in motion;
> Mystery of Silence
> Of Love, and of Beauty![162]

Although Crowley rewrote the ritual completely in 1913 to reflect *The Book of the Law*, these various Gnostic currents were still considered influential as seen in the list of saints commemorated in the Gnostic Mass, which include Tahuti (Thoth/Hermes), Pythagoras, Dionysus, Simon Magus, Manes (Mani), Basilides, Valentinus, Bardesanes (Bardaisan),

[160] Ibid., 4, 18, 23.

[161] Ibid., 18.

[162] Ibid., 20.

Jacob Boehme [*sic*], Gérard Encausse, and William Blake.[163] During the consecration of the Eucharistic elements in the Gnostic Mass, the Priest makes this connection explicit:

> Here ye all, saints of the true church of old time now essentially present, that of ye we claim heirship, with ye we claim communion, from ye we claim benediction in the name of IAO.[164]

Richard Smith examines the revival of ancient Gnosis in two other modern organizations which also derive from the French Gnostic churches, the Ecclesia Gnostica (not affliated with E.G.C.) and the Associacion Gnostica de Estudios Anthropologicos y Culturales (with the English branch The Gnostic Center).[165] Smith notes that two twentieth century works on the history of Gnosticism, *The Gnostics and Their Remains* by C. W. King (1887) and *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* by M.R.S. Mead (1906), were influential within the Theosophical Society, whose members founded the Liberal Catholic Church and its close cousin, the Ecclesia Gnostica.[166] While the apostolic succession of the bishops of the Ecclesia Gnostica also proceeds in part from the French Gnostic Churches, the Gnosticism of the Ecclesia Gnostica is the "*gnosis kardias*, the knowledge of the heart" in which the conflict between spirit and flesh ultimately restores wholeness, or self-realization, in the symbolism of mystical marriage.[167] Smith points out

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[163] *Liber XV*: "V: Of the Office of the Collects Which Are Eleven in Number."

[164] *Liber XV*: "VI: Of the Consecration of the Elements."

[165] Note that Ecclesia Gnostica is a different Gnostic church which derives from the same lineage as the E.G.C.

[166] Richard Smith, "The Revival of Ancient Gnosis," in *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology and Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Robert A. Segal (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 205; Richard Kaczynski, "Continuing Knowledge from Generation unto Generation: The Social and Literary Background of Aleister Crowley's Magick," in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 144.

[167] Smith, "Revival of Ancient Gnosis," 207, 209.

that, like other mystery religions, the sacraments of the Ecclesia Gnostica are transformative rather than commemorative, and reflective of initiatory grades.[168] However, Stephen Hoeller, Bishop of Ecclesia Gnostica, stated that regardless of any doubts about apostolic succession in the E.G.C., the Gnostic Mass itself cannot be said to be Gnostic since there is no mention of Christ:

> While it cannot be thus said to be either a Mass or catholic, one may also say that it has hearty little in it that could be called Gnostic either, unless the frequent use of the mystic word IAO unaccompanied by any other Gnostic feature should be accepted as atoning for the omission of everything else. The Ecclesiae Gnosticae Catholicae Canon Missae [the Gnostic Mass] is not what its title declares. It is a complicated magical ceremony of considerable dramatic effect written in the typical bombastic style of Crowley, and dilated with his poetry, and containing quasi-Egyptian, Kabbalistic and other elements, with the Christian sacramental mythos notably absent. It does not contain many of the essential features which make up a Mass in any and all branches of the church catholic whether in East or West. Although it does contain the necessary formula of consecration in Greek ("this is my body" and "this is the chalice of my blood") the formula of consecration is taken out of the traditional context wherein it is identified as spoken by Jesus the Christ. Also in other portions of the Mass the consecrated host is referred to as sperm, and indeed there exists a probably well-founded rumour to the effect that the bread-like substance used in the Mass contains sperm. It is also telling that although many personages of various spiritual stature from Lao-Tze and Krishna to Rabelais, Swinburne and (naturally) Sir Aleister Crowley are mentioned by name in the Mass, the name of Jesus or Christ is never mentioned once. This ritual is clearly not a Mass in any sense of the Christian and catholic mythos.[169]

Richard Smith further addresses the Gnostic elements found in the Associacion Gnostica de Estudios Anthropologicos y Culturales (also called the Gnostic Association), noting that its founder, Samael Aun Weor, shared many of the same influences as the

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[168] Ibid., 210.

[169] Stephen A. Hoeller, "Ecclesia Gnostica Position Paper Concerning the Thelemite or Crowleyan Gnostic Churches," The Ordo Templi Orientis Phenomenon, last accessed September 30, 2014, http://www.parareligion.ch/hoeller.htm.

bishops in the French Gnostic Churches, including Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Theosophy and Spiritualism.[170] Master Samael, as he was called, was influenced by Arnoldo Krumm-Heller, a German Rosicrucian and Gnostic bishop, who had been involved with Karl Kellner of the O.T.O. and American Rosicrucian P.B. Randolph.[171] Sex magic was a common thread among them all and Master Samael taught that conserving the life-giving seed would lead to regeneration and transformation, writing, "He who wants to become God, should not ejaculate the semen."[172] For Master Samael, the serpentine power is "Mother God "which as it ascends is "the brazen serpent which healed the Israelites" but which as it descends is "the tempting serpent of Eden."[173] Smith compares this to the second century Naassenes who saw semen as the creative word which when released in intercourse leads to birth and death, but when reversed like the Jordan River is a saving energy depicted as a serpent.[174] Notably, Hadit in *The Book of the Law* describes two serpent powers similar to those mentioned by Master Samael and the Naassenes:

> I am the secret Serpent coiled about to spring: in my coiling there is joy. If I lift up my head, I and my Nuit are one. If I droop down my head, and shoot forth venom, then is rapture of the earth, and I and the earth are one.[175]

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[170] Smith, "Revival of Ancient Gnosis," 211.

[171] Ibid.

[172] Ibid., 211-213.

[173] Ibid., 213.

[174] Ibid., 215.

[175] *Liber AL* II:26.

While there are numerous references in the Gnostic Mass to serpents, including the serpentine path of the Priestess and the serpent crown of the Priest, the serpent flame appears to be associated primarily with the Priest as bearer of the lance.[176] According to the Gnostic Mass, the joining of the host on the tip of the lance with the wine in the cup makes manifest the Lion and the Serpent, as that which "destroys the destroyer" and which "bestows health and wealth and strength and joy and peace, and that fulfillment of will and of love under will that is perpetual happiness."[177] E.G.C. Bishops Helena and Tau Apiryon explain that the Lion and the Serpent is "the dialectic union of opposites that conquers death" and "the force of Baphomet" also imaged as a union of opposites in which differences are held in balance but not dissolved.[178]

Gnosticism is often associated with illicit sexual practices which disrupt gender roles and patriarchal society either through nonreproductive or unsanctioned sexuality or through ritualized sexuality which repurposes sexuality in order to create spiritual or social change. Diverse practices such as abstinence, retention of semen, love feasts, homosexuality, witchcraft, Kabbalah, alchemy, Tantra, and erotic mysticism contribute to the belief in nineteenth century esotericism that divine creative energy can be

[176] *Liber AL* I:61. In the Gnostic Mass only the Priest wears a serpent crown (uraenus) but in *The Book of the Law*, Nuit states that both the prince-priest and the Scarlet Woman wear the "splendrous serpent" burning on their brows. *Liber AL* I:15-19.

[177] *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Marriage and Consummation of the Elements."

[178] Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*, 35. Baphomet is a goat-headed, hooved and winged god which displays male and female genitalia, named by French occultist Alphonse Louis Constant (Eliphas Levi) in *Transcendental Magic* (1896) "the Sabbatic Goat." Baphomet is the partner of Babalon in the Creed of the Gnostic Mass, in which the Thelemite says, "And I believe in the Serpent and the Lion, Mystery of Mystery, in His name BAPHOMET." However, when the Veil is parted the Priest also invokes several god-names in addition to Iao Sabao which are associated with historical Gnostic sects and which represent the union of opposites; for example, Abraxas who is portrayed as a man-rooster-serpent and Meitras who is portrayed as either a lion head with a serpent body (as Chnoubis) or man with a lion head whose torso is entwined by a serpent (also under a variety of names, including Aion and Ialdabaoth).

experienced and/or manipulated through sexuality.[179] Hugh Urban traces the association of illicit sexuality with reform, individualism and magic, noting that practitioners of sexual magic are inherently seekers of the "hidden truth" which leads to social, political and psychological liberation.[180] Urban points out that Theodor Reuss, one of the founders of the O.T.O., envisioned a "Neo-Gnostic" world in which sexuality was liberated from original sin. According to Reuss, this new world would be:

> a new civilization, a new system of morals will arise from the new Christianity of the gnostic Templar-Christians … The gnostics recognize that humanity's "resemblance to God" consists in the fact that they are able to grasp and understand that the divinity of the earthly act of procreation as a parallel of the divine act of original creation … [T]he act of love consummated under the control of will in God is a sacramental act, a "Mystic Marriage with God," a communion, a union of self with God.[181]

Although Reuss claimed that this "sexual re-education" would eliminate private property and forced labor, he also suggested that it would also lead to eugenics and a restoration of the "cult of Motherhood."[182] While pregnant women were to be considered "saints," Reuss ultimately claimed that the magical power in sexuality is found in the semen and that the secret interpretation of the Gnostic Mass was based on "the union of man with God through consumption of semen."[183] Crowley, however, explicitly states that while "sex is the eternal fire of the race," that which feeds divine consciousness is "analogous

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[179] Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 54.

[180] Ibid., 7.

[181] Reuss, "The Gnostic Neo-Christians" (1917), reproduced in Peter Koenig, Der Kleine Theodor Reuss Reader (Muniche: Arbeitgemeinschaft für Religions- und Weltanschauungsfragen, 1993), translated and quoted in Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 103.

[182] Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 102-103.

[183] Reuss, from Peter Koenig, http://www.parareligion.ch, quoted in Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 101.

to semen, but not identical with it."[184] It is only after the orgasmic word "HRILIU" is whispered by the Priestess and Priest together that the Lion and the Serpent as "destroyer of the destroyer" is proclaimed present, the Law of Thelema announced, and the consecrated elements consumed.[185]

Recently, scholars have drawn numerous connections between the hidden sexual history of paganism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the sex magic practices of modern mystics and magicians.[186] Like Gnosticism, esoteric sexuality has been gradually removed from formal religious contexts and has now been adapted to personal gnosis and individual theurgy. Several scholars have made interesting claims about Crowley and sexual ecstasy, locating mystical union in the enthusiasm of sexuality (*eros*) rather than the procreative functions of sexuality. Matthew D. Rogers suggests that while Crowley's understanding of Gnosticism stems from his formal education and the influence of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society, Crowley's emphasis on enthusiasm derives from his interpretation of Plato's *furores*.[187] Rogers notes that Crowley associated genius with mania, which can be known through either chaotic madness or organized inspiration. In "Energized Enthusiasm," Crowley names IAO as "the supreme One of the Gnostics, the true God," represented by Apollo, Dionysus and

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[184] Aleister Crowley, "Energized Enthusiasm: A Note on Theurgy," in Vol. 3 of *The Best of the Equinox: Sex Magick,* ed. by Lon Milo DuQuette (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2013), 29 and 35.

[185] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 110.

[186] For example, see: Wouter J. Hanegraaf and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds. *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

[187] Matthew D. Rogers, "Frenzies of the Beast: The Phaedran Furores in the Rites and Writings of Aleister Crowley," in Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism, ed. by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 210.

Aphrodite or the methods of prophecy, mania and eroticism.[188] While Crowley interprets these as voice/music, wine/drugs, and sex, Crowley's theurgy (Magick) is found in the controlled use rather than in abuse of these methods.[189] Although energized enthusiasm is a type of force or "secretion" sometimes associated with semen, it is also the "spasm" of awareness found in meditation and the "spasmodic stage" in sacred dance in which consciousness flickers and breaks through to divine consciousness.[190] It is raised enthusiasm which invokes a state of ecstasy, or "genial orgasm," which is gnostic awareness.[191] In his autobiography, Crowley describes the importance of enthusiasm and the celebration of universal forces in the Gnostic Mass ritual:

> Human nature demands (in the case of most people) the satisfaction of the religious instinct, and, to very many, this may best be done by ceremonial means. I wished therefore to construct a ritual through which people might enter into ecstasy as they have always done under the influence of appropriate ritual. In recent years, there has been an increasing failure to attain this object, because established cults shock their intellectual convictions and outrage their common sense. Thus minds criticize their enthusiasm; they are [as] unable to consummate the union of their individual souls with the universal soul as a bridegroom would be to consummate his marriage if his love were constantly reminded that its assumptions were intellectually absurd.
>
> I resolved that my Ritual should celebrate the sublimity of the operation of universal forces without introducing disputable metaphysical theories. I would neither make nor imply any statement about nature which would not be endorsed by the most materialistic man of science. On the surface this may sound difficult; but in practice I found it perfectly simple to

[188] Ibid., 212.

[189] Ibid., 219.

[190] According to Crowley, this "secretion" which leads to works of Genius is rarely found in men and even less in women; women who have it are described as "invariably androgyne." Crowley, "Energized Enthusiasm," 29, 35 and 46.

[191] Rogers, "Frenzies of the Beast," 216-217.

combine the most rigidly rational conceptions of phenomena with the most exalted and enthusiastic celebration of their sublimity.[192]

[192] Crowley, from *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley : An Autohagiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), Chapter 73, quoted in Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery*: A Primer of Thelemic Ecclesiastical Gnosticism, No. 2 of *Red Flame: A Thelemic Research Journal* (New York: Ordo Templi Orientis, 1995), 27.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

For I am divided for love's sake, for the chance of union.
Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law*

The Scarlet Woman, the Queer Mass and Formulae

While the Gnostic Mass seems to assert that the Great Work is the self-actualization of Thelema regardless of sex or gender, the operation of the Mass itself involves the firm division of duties and privileges according to sex and gender. Although it is not possible to give a full overview of the work of Aleister Crowley or of occultism in general in this thesis, some preliminary topics which have important implications for women as ritualists and as occultists will be briefly addressed. First, Crowley associated himself with the Great Beast of the Book of Revelation, in part because his mother nicknamed him that as a child and in part because he himself identified with it; however, *The Book of the Law* reinforced his public claim as not simply *a* beast, or *like* the Beast, but actually *that* Beast.[1] One result is that his female ritual partners were given the title and the characteristics of the Scarlet Woman, or the Whore of Babalon.[2] This association would lead Crowley to write extensively about the desirable qualities in a female ritual partner such as attractiveness, lust, fearlessness, and fertility, but also about the ways in

[1] Tobias Churton, *Aleister Crowley The Biography: Spiritual Revolutionary, Romantic Explorer, Occult Master – Spy* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2011), 6.

[2] Crowley's spelling is intentional and differentiates the goddess from the geographical place or Judeo-Christian interpretations. Nevill Drury, *Stealing Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Modern Western Magic*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 85. The Scarlet Woman is the Whore of Babalon (a priestess of Babalon), not necessarily Babalon herself unless she is able to embody her.

which actual women failed to embody her.[3] For Crowley, Babalon is the mother of the New Aeon, and therefore is present in both *The Book of the Law* as the Scarlet Woman and in the Gnostic Mass as the Priestess, the Cup of Babalon, the womb and the "Holy Graal."[4] It might perhaps be said that the Virgin of the Gnostic Mass is yet the unawakened female, or woman as materia/matrix, while Babalon is the awakened female, or woman as creativity/creatrix.[5] Therefore, a true, awakened Scarlet Woman embodies Babalon, as virgin, whore and mother, which, while perhaps expansive in the context of Victorian England, appears to limit the female ritual partner to roles defined by sexuality and procreation.

Secondly, the agency of women in gendered rituals is also indirectly addressed in the current debate surrounding same-sex, intersexed and transgender Gnostic Mass.[6] Michael Effertz, in *Priest/ess: In Advocacy of Queer Gnostic Mass* (2012), presents the argument that the ritual of the Gnostic Mass could provide a vehicle for transcending gendered polarity.[7] He points out that not only did Crowley participate in many other same-sex and transgendered sexual rituals (as Alys Cusack), but Crowley also claimed

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[3] Aleister Crowley, "The New and Old Commentaries to Liber AL vel Legis, The Book of the Law," Hermetic.com, last accessed September 30, 2014, http://hermetic.com/legis/new-comment/, comments for *Liber AL* I:15.

[4] Aleister Crowley, "One Star in Sight," in *Magick Liber ABA Book Four: Parts I-IV*, by Aleister Crowley, with Mary Desti and Leila Waddell, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1997) 496. Aleister Crowley, "Liber Samekh," in *Magick Liber ABA Book Four: Parts I-IV*, by Aleister Crowley, with Mary Desti and Leila Waddell, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1997) , 517.

[5] "Awakened" here is not necessarily sexually aware or experienced but divinely and energetically activated, a partner in creation, in the manner of Shakti.

[6] Same-sex, intersexed and transgender Mass (gender-alternative Mass) permits either or both the Priest and the Priestess roles to be filled by any person of the appropriate degree, regardless of physical attributes or cultural behavior, whether temporary or permanent.

[7] Michael Effertz, *Priest/less: In Advocacy of Queer Gnostic Mass* (West Hollywood, CA: Luxor Media Group, 2012), xx.

that a magician could only understand the holy mysteries by resolving sexual polarity.[8] While same-sex marriages are performed by the E.G.C., and no official restrictions are placed on the performance of the roles of Priest or the Priestess by "partially trans-gendered," infertile or non-menstruating persons, the Priest and the Priestess positions are officially performed by men and women, respectively.[9] Since the Gnostic Mass cannot be performed publicly without officers who are both ordained clergy of the E.G.C. and degreed members of the O.T.O., no public queer Gnostic Mass can be held without the approval of the Patriarch of the E.G.C. and the Outer Head of the Order (of the O.T.O.), titles held by an individual known by his title, Hymenaeus Beta.[10]

Effertz attempts to show that since there is no absolute prohibition within the ritual itself, the decision not to allow public queer Masses is primarily administrative. He contends that it is discriminatory to require gay, lesbian and queer people to perform heterosexually in public rituals.[11] Effertz claims that for Crowley, the individual is the basic unit of society, not the couple or the family, asking pointedly, "[D]oes E.G.C. policy regard the Priest and Priestess principally as parts of a couple rather than as sovereign individuals?"[12] The ritual of the Gnostic Mass states that only the Priest takes communion because the other officers are "part of the Priest," which seems to indicate

[8] As Alys Cusack, Crowley referred to himself in his notes as the Priestess. Effertz, *Priest/less*, xx-xxi and 19.

[9] Ibid., 14*ff*.

[10] See Argument 17. Ibid., 21.

[11] Ibid., 45.

[12] Ibid.

that the Mass is, after all, about the individual, but more particularly, the Priest.[13] While Effertz' full argument cannot be adequately covered here, it is interesting to note that if the Gnostic Mass is perceived to be a mystic marriage and same-sex marriages are performed by E.G.C., the implication is that the mystic marriage should follow the pattern of human marriages. Although he provides a broad selection of quotes from Crowley supporting his argument that same-sex, intersexed and transgendered rituals were encouraged as part of a magician's practice, Effertz does not directly address the influence of *The Book of the Law* on the intention and structure of the Gnostic Mass.[14] In any case, it appears that there is little public involvement in this debate by either the Priestesses or other women members of the E.G.C., which is interesting considering that a gender-alternative Priestess might directly impact the potential responsibilities, privileges and restrictions of women in the Gnostic Mass.

The third topic which provides a basis for understanding the gendered roles of the Gnostic Mass is indicated by the question: For what purpose is the ritual performed? The possible answers vary greatly but each has particular implications for the role of the Priestess. Sometimes termed "formulae," these interpretations of how and why the Mass works might be loosely organized into four types: Devotion, initiation, sex magic and cosmogony.[15] Devotion may be primarily the experience of some of the congregation, in which the ritual provides an opportunity to perceive the divine presence embodied in the Priestess, although the Priest and Priestess are also devotional in their service. Initiation

[13] Ibid., 46; *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements."

[14] According to bishop NLPs, members rarely discuss *The Book of the Law* publicly. See Chapter One, n.118, for details.

[15] Effertz, *Priest/less*, 16.

seems to be tied to the experience of the Priest as the representative of the self-conscious individual; however, the movements of the other officers may also be considered initiatory, each of a different type and/or degree.[16] Sex magic seems to be one of the main functions of the Priest and the Priestess in which the intention of the magical will is directed through sexual principles in order to achieve transformative results represented by the conception of a symbolic child. For some, the ritual seems to indicate either a Gnostic or Kabbalistic conception of the origins and structure of the universe.[17] This cosmogony can be found in the words of the ritual which contain apparently Gnostic elements such as the Lion and the Serpent, in the floor layout which follows a Kabbalistic Tree of Life pattern of pillars and triads, and in the hope of a New Aeon. In each of these formulae, the role of the Priestess is colored by the larger purpose of the ritual: As an object of devotion, as an initiator, as a sexual or procreative partner, or as a cosmic matrix. Although no one formula appears to explain all of the elements found in the Gnostic Mass and local Masses can vary in practice, the private intention of a particular Priestess may provide important context for her understanding and performance.

Sex Magic, Transformation, and the Role of Women

A relevant thread in scholarship is the recent focus on the sexuality and sexual practices of Aleister Crowley as intentional acts of exploration and transformation. Rather than describe the details of his personal and public life as merely reactions to

[16] Presumably, like other esoteric orders, each officer has a different set of responsibilities and understandings which reveal themselves in the preparation and performance of the work.

[17] Effertz, *Priest/less*, 16; Tau Apiryon and Helena, *Mystery of Mystery: A Primer of Thelemic Ecclesiastical Gnosticism*, No. 2 of *Red Flame: A Thelemic Research Journal* (New York: Ordo Templi Orientis, 1995); Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005).

Victorian morality, scholars have begun to explore the question of purposefulness in Crowley's sexuality from the perspective of bisexuality/androgyny, Tantra, and phallicism. While these three labels might privilege method over intention, each perspective seems to position the role of the Priestess in the Gnostic Mass differently; for example, as a feminized role for transgressing the boundaries of the ego, as a polarized focus for creating new effects or experience through sexual energy, or as a sacramental partner in ecstatic union.

Although Crowley transcribed *The Book of the Law* in 1904, the manuscript was set aside and forgotten until 1909. After rediscovering it, Crowley concluded that the interim tragedies of his daughter's death, his deteriorating marriage, and a horrific climbing accident in which he was the only survivor were due to his failure of duty to Thelema.[18] Alex Owen notes that Crowley's recommitment to the role of prophet of the New Aeon, or "the unification of the male and female as represented in the androgynous figure of Horus," immediately preceded Crowley's transformative journey through the North African desert with his student Victor Neuburg.[19] She convincingly portrays Crowley's journey to self-annilation as an "exploration of subjectivity," in which ritualized penetration by the goat-god Pan (via Neuburg) became the final expression of his unmasked personality before he attempted the invocation of Chaos which would dissolve the ego completely.[20] Owen describes this dangerous process – the crossing of the abyss – as the "irrevocable abandonment of the 'I' along with its accompanying claim

[18] Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 213.

[19] Ibid., 212-213.

[20] Ibid., 187, 205.

to sole authority" in which the magician must surrender the self through an act of will; further, she claims this is the mystical death which necessarily precedes mystical union.[21] For Crowley, this union results in an undissolved androgyny in which wholeness is represented by combination, balanced duality and bisexuality.[22] However, Owen observes that what Crowley perceived as androgyny reinforces "heterodox masculinity" as illustrated by Alys, his feminine persona, who is the sexualized object of masculine desire and savagery.[23] She suggests that the rape fantasy of Pan was a performance of Crowley's own hostility towards women in which he maintains creative power and choice, sacrificing himself to himself.[24] Despite the alienating effects of these rituals which each struggled to assimilate, Crowley and Neuburg continued to experiment with sex magic until 1914.[25] By then, Crowley had been initiated into the O.T.O. and become the head of the British O.T.O. under the ritual name Baphomet. Owen explains the confluence of sex magic practices which resulted in a sexualized interpretation of *The Book of the Law* and Crowley's particular type of sex magic, Magick:

> Maintaining that sex magic lay behind the symbolism of Freemasonry and Hermeticism, the Ordo Templi Orientis taught a form of sexualized spirituality very similar to that of the left-hand path of Benagli Tantrism. Its higher grades were concerned with autoerotic and heterosexual magic, and the latter, as in tantric rites, could culminate in sexual intercourse. Crowley later added an elevated grade concerned with homosexual magic. The Ordo Templi Orientis regarded the act of sexual intercourse as the holiest of religious sacraments, and Crowley brought to this his own

[21] Ibid., 209-210; 201. According to Owen, the defeat of Chaos was proclaimed by the name Babalon, written in the sand.

[22] Ibid., 214.

[23] Ibid., 215.

[24] Ibid., 216.

[25] Ibid., 217.

> versions of sexual practice interlaced with what he now took to be relevant veiled teachings in *The Book of the Law*.[26]

Hugh Urban examines more deeply the purposefulness of Crowley's sexuality and sexual practices as a Western adaptation of Indian Tantra principles. He emphasizes, however, that although traditional Indian Tantra and Western Tantric practitioners both perform sexual transgressive acts as a method of realization and energy manipulation, Indian Tantra practitioners deliberately but only temporarily break moral boundaries (taboos) which are otherwise strictly maintained.[27] In contrast, Western Tantric practitioners sought to challenge, subvert and destroy nineteenth-century morality and social rigidity, viewing sexuality not only as a tool of liberation but as a divine act of union which emulates the power of creation itself.[28] Nonetheless, the role of women in these two forms of Tantra was essentially the same: Within a set of performative criteria, women were the interchangeable foci of the practitioner's awakening and manipulation of energy, not herself a true practitioner or initiate. In traditional Indian Tantra, the female partner was honored but not empowered or liberated; unlike her male partner, she did not experience the union of the male and female principle within herself.[29]

While O.T.O. co-founder Theodor Reuss honored the mother as the high Priestess of her family and every pregnant woman as a saint, he thought that retaining semen or

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[26] Ibid., 218.

[27] Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 84.

[28] Ibid., 84, 102.

[29] Ibid., 91-92.

consuming the postcoital fluids was the source of magical power.[30] Crowley continued in this direction by emphasizing autoerotic and homosexual practices in the higher degrees of the O.T.O., claiming that goal of the magician is to create a divine child through non-heterosexual procreation.[31] According to Crowley, for the divine child born of a woman, she is an assistant, a blank slate, merely a "temporary expedient, a shrine indeed for the God, but not the God," but for the magical child born of the magician's force and will, she is even less necessary, ultimately replaceable by even a dog.[32] Urban notes that although transgression in sex rituals may liberate individuals by breaking boundaries of the self, it creates a power imbalance in which others are exploited and, ultimately, reinforces the values and taboos of the moral norm by maintaining the reactionary aspect.[33] The ever-receding horizon of transgression leads to an endless redrawing of the boundary between the Self and the Absolute in which union can only be experienced momentarily with a continually reimaged and differentiated Other. Only the magical child – and not the magician – creates a permanent and stable change, a New Aeon, by destroying and replacing the old order completely.

The third recent trend in interpretation of Crowley's sexuality and sex practices is phallicism, which might be loosely defined as the worship of the generative principle, represented by the phallus (or the vagina, or the phallus and vagina) as the ancient and continuing central secret of religion. Richard Kaczynski points out that Crowley's type of

[30] Ibid., 101, 103, 104.

[31] Ibid., 133.

[32] Crowley, from Francis King, ed., *The Secret Rituals of the O.T.O.* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973) and from Scott Michelson, ed., *Portable Darkness: An Aleister Crowley Reader* (New York: Harmony Books, 1989), quoted in Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 133-134.

[33] Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 135.

sex magic (Magick) grew organically in the Victorian milieu of spiritualism, occultism and phallicism.[34] He suggests that "the Victorian fascination with sexuality" could be seen in the published literature on sexuality increasingly available in psychology, medicine and health, poetry, anthropology, folklorists, art history, travelogues, and the translated sacred texts of India.[35] Several scholars have traced the roots of phallicism in modern religious movements, while others argued that ancient phallicism survived in the Roman Catholic Church, in Gnosticism, and in the Western esoteric orders such as Rosicrucianism.[36] Theodor Reuss claimed that the O.T.O. possessed the secret of sexual magic which explained nature, religion and Freemasonry, which was likely obtained from O.T.O. co-founder Carl Kellner from Hargrave Jennings, author of several books on phallicism.[37] Jennings, along with other writers on phallicism, such as Richard Payne Knight, Richard Burton, and J. G. R. Forlong, were recommended by Crowley to his students and are listed as saints in the ritual of the Gnostic Mass.[38] From this perspective, heterosexual sex is the sacred act of spirituality, the mystical union, in which it is not simply a method for awakening and manipulating energy but the central sacrament of devotion and worship.

Alchemical symbolism is most often found in this interpretation of phallicism, or heterosexual union as the central sacrament of religion. In Crowley's writings on sex

[34] Richard Kaczynski, "Continuing Knowledge from Generation unto Generation: The Social and Literary Background of Aleister Crowley's Magick," in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 141.

[35] Ibid., 151, 154-155.

[36] Ibid., 153-157.

[37] Ibid., 161-162.

[38] Ibid., 153, 167.

magic, the elixir is consistently described as the post-coital fluids which are consumed by both partners: "Let him drink the Sacrament and let him communicate the same."[39] While semen contains "a creative life which cannot be baulked," the elixir of consummation has magical potency which can be used to regenerate the partners, create talismans or provide healing.[40] Using alchemical terms, Crowley describes the creation of the elixir, or quintessence, as the fusion of the Serpent, or the principle of immortality found in the Blood of the Red Lion [semen], with the Egg, which is carried by the Gluten of the White Eagle. [41] Lon Milo DuQuette, Archbishop in the E.G.C., notes that the magical laws that create effects on nonphysical planes are the same laws which create a physical child on the physical plane. [42] He says that these principles are veiled in Crowley's words: orgasm and ecstasy may be called "death" and "sacrifice," while the penis is the lance, the wand, the rood, or the cross and the vagina is the cup, the grail, or the rose.[43] Although these symbols reflect gender binaries, DuQuette claims that the child is the elixir, or the "golden moment of disintegrating ecstatic union," and the "fertile medium" for intentional thought.[44] He says that consuming this child allows the communicant to be "pregnant with the fertilized object of their own particular heart's desire."[45] In the

[39] Nevill Drury, *Stealing Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Modern Western Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 96.

[40] Ibid., 99.

[41] Ibid., 99.

[42] Lon Milo DuQuette, "Introduction," in Aleister Crowley, Vol. 3 of *The Best of the Equinox: Sex Magick*, ed. Lon Milo DuQuette (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2013), xv.

[43] Ibid., xii.

[44] Ibid., xvi.

[45] Ibid.

Gnostic Mass, sex is the sacrament and the child produced is the source of creative power, not the Priest or the Priestess. However, while the man and the woman should both be healthy and energetic, mutually attracted and sympathetic operationally, the agent in the Gnostic Mass is the Red Lion, or the male Priest.[46] According to Crowley, it is the Serpent, or "the principle of immortality, the self-renewal through incarnation, of persistent will, inherent in the 'Red Lion'" which "fuses" with the Egg, delivering the generating Word found in the semen.[47]

Scarlet Women: Birthing the New Aeon

Missing from most discussions about the Gnostic Mass is the voice of the Priestess. While there are a few publicly known Priestesses, there is relatively little written specifically about their experiences as Priestesses in the Gnostic Mass. Three main groupings provide some insight into the balancing of individualism and gendered roles for occult women: Crowley's Scarlet Women, the Priestesses of Agapé Lodge, and modern Priestesses. The first group is Crowley's Scarlet Women, which includes his wife Rose Crowley, his primary magical partner Leah Hirsig, other consecrated Scarlet Women, and a few women not consecrated but acting in a similar capacity. While Crowley might have been originally attracted to them sexually, his main interest appears to be in their ability to hold the position of Scarlet Woman as his sex magic partner. Many of these women also participated substantially in ritual experimentation, in the development, transcribing and editing of books, and in the construction of ritual spaces and communal homes. On one hand, Crowley highly valued the Scarlet Women as

[46] Drury, *Stealing Fire*, 99.

[47] Crowley, from "Emblems and Modes of Use," www.aethyria.com, quoted in Drury, *Stealing Fire*, 99-100.

necessary to establish the New Aeon of *The Book of the Law*, claiming: "By my Woman called the Scarlet Woman, who is any Woman that receives and transmits my Solar Word and Being, is this my Work achieved: for without Woman man has no power." [48] On the other hand, "failure" may have been impacted by unsuccessful reproduction; many of his diary entries about the Scarlet Women appear to be focused on the effect of their sexual attractiveness or behavior on his physical potency, the birth and death of children, attempted conceptions, pregnant reconciliations, disappointing miscarriages, rebellious abortions and jealous competitiveness.[49] Although Crowley declares with some justification that the Scarlet Women fail as partners because of addiction, instability or lack of commitment, his diary and letters suggest that sexual attraction or fertility also fails.[50] Crowley's committed partner in the Great Work, Leah Hirsig, wrote in her journal after being replaced by a new Scarlet Woman:

> A word to Dorothy. She is the Scarlet Woman & she will show her failure or her success quite differently to previous Scarlet Women, for she is the mother of a *race* of a new Dynasty. How I would love to write my ideas of succession and breeding and all that. But it isn't my job. That will be done by my Beloved Beast all in good time. He will arrange everything for the new Civilization – And I shall live in that Civilization I suppose. I don't know and don't care.[51]

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[48] Crowley, in *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries on the Book of the Law*, ed. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (Montreal: 93 Publishing, 1974), quoted in Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002), 131.

[49] Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 146, 254; Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*. Revised and Expanded Ed. (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 347, 366, 489, 491-2.

[50] Note 51; Aleister Crowley, "The New and Old Commentaries to Liber AL vel Legis, The Book of the Law," Hermetic.com. Last Accessed September 30, 2014, http://hermetic.com/legis/new-comment/, comments for *Liber AL* I:15.

[51] Italics in original. Within a year, however, Leah returned to act as secretary and becomes pregnant by another. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 321-322.

Lawrence Sutin notes that while romantic love was not a requirement in Crowley's choice of Scarlet Women, irresistible attraction and compatible psychology was.[52] Discussing the section in Part III of *The Book of the Law* which includes the phrase "Then I will lift her to pinnacles of power: Then will I breed from her a child mightier than all the kings on earth," Sutin claims that Crowley interpreted this as a spiritual child or a manifested intention, not necessarily a biological child.[53] However, Crowley claimed that bearing children for women is almost always part of their True Will and that few women have interests other than devotion to children and when denied, turn to "malignant mischief" and "domestic destruction" comparable to witchcraft.[54] Indeed, he banned one pregnant lover from the communal household until after the birth of her child for having worked malevolent magic which he believed had contributed to the deaths of Leah Hirsig's infant girl and unborn son.[55] Although it seems that many of the Scarlet Women were strongly interested in having biological children with Crowley, it was as true that Crowley desired children desperately. When Scarlet Woman Pearl Brooksmith failed to conceive after two years and then had an emergency hysterectomy, within six months Crowley asked another woman to have a child with him – she conceived and gave birth to a boy, his final living child of three.[56] It is clear that in at least some cases, sex magic for Crowley was also the basis of intentional reproduction for

[52] Ibid., 131-132.

[53] Ibid., 132.

[54] Crowley, from *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley : An Autohagiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), Chapter 50, quoted in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 132, 146.

[55] Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 285; Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 366.

[56] Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 489.

the sake of obtaining a biological child, preferably male, who might inherit the energy of the New Aeon.[57]

Despite this preoccupation with sexuality and reproduction, Crowley did advocate publicly for the rights of women as individuals which he felt were tied to sexual freedom and the abolition of marriage.[58] Alex Owen addresses the changing views of gender in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as reflected in identities and activities of occultists and their contemporaries. British feminism during this period advocated two views which "cohabitated uneasily:" a critique of women's roles with a push for intellectual and social rights for women on the basis of gender equality and a women's rights agenda defined by femininity and motherhood as highly-valued ideals.[59] Owen suggests that for some women occultism may have been appealing precisely because it could contain these viewpoints at once: Mysticism provided emotional transformation and spiritual connection with a divine feminine, while training in magic supported individual experimentation and intellectual discovery.[60] Within esoteric orders such as the Theosophical Society or the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, dedicated, intelligent women could pursue advanced studies and progress in leadership, regardless of social or educational backgrounds. Several of these women were also activists for women's rights in marriage and property law, child custody, birth control, dress reform

[57] See Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 253; Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 308, 347; and *Liber AL* II 54-55. For more about the racial and occult implications of motherhood and intentional birth for Crowley and his contemporaries, see Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, Chapter 3.

[58] For an interesting "textual collage" of Crowley's comments about women and women's rights, see Aleister Crowley, "Every Woman is a Star," ed. John 'Ash' Bowie, Eidolons of Ash, last accessed September 30, 2014, http://hermetic.com/eidolons/Every_Woman_is_a_Star.

[59] Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, 86.

[60] Ibid., 88-89.

and women's health. Unfortunately, this activism was not without cost; many women abandoned marriages, lost custody rights, were publicly accused of depravity, or struggled with depression or lifelong poverty.[61] Among occultists, human sexuality was considered a valuable but potentially dangerous power; some orders strongly recommended celibacy as the highest state for a clear-minded adept while others focused on the "sex-forces" as an essential mechanism for self-exploration and reality construction.[62] While Crowley clearly supported the latter view by validating the "whore" in women who embraced uninhibited sexual desire and by training female magicians and promoting them to higher degrees and leadership positions, at the same time he could maintain contemporary sex role terminology and distinctions, even going so far as to claim that it was the moral duty of all women to bear and nurture children during war.[63]

The question of whether Crowley himself ever performed the Gnostic Mass in full is strangely uncertain, given his diligence in keeping a "magical diary" of his ritual work, along with day-to-day notations.[64] The ritual of the Gnostic Mass was originally written in 1913, and finalized in 1919, suggesting that earlier Scarlet Women (such as Rose

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[61] Ibid., 91-98.

[62] Ibid., 99, 101.

[63] Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 132, 254.

[64] Tobias Churton cites a letter from Crowley in which suggests that an early version of the Gnostic Mass was performed in 1913. Tobias Churton, *Aleister Crowley The Biography: Spiritual Revolutionary, Romantic Explorer, Occult Master – Spy* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2011), 183. Sutin cites a letter from Gerald Yorke which Yorke claims Crowley celebrated the Gnostic Mass publicly with priestess and children "decorously clad." Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 235. According to Starr, Crowley himself said that he partially celebrated the Gnostic Mass at the Abbey of Thelema "doing only bits of it." Martin P. Starr, *The Unknown God: W.T. Smith and the Thelemites*. (Bolingbrook: The Teitan Press, 2003), 190. However, Phyllis Seckler claims that Jane Wolfe did participate in the Mass at the Abbey supervised by Crowley. Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass: Annotations and Commentary by Helena and Tau Apiryon," The Invisible Basilica of Sabazius, last accessed September 29, 2104, http://hermetic.com/sabazius/gmnotes.htm#credits.

Crowley and Leila Waddell) may not have performed the Gnostic Mass as it is currently known, if at all. In 1910, Leila Waddell performed in the Rites of Eleusis, a series of rituals designed to reveal the replacement of the seven planetary paths of wisdom in the Greek Mysteries with Crowley's new vision. These public rituals portrayed the death of Apollo and the New Aeon of a Crowned Child, Ra-Hoor-Khuit, seen by the Virginal Moon through a veil torn by "the spirit of the Infinite All, great Pan."[65] While the term "Scarlet Woman" can only refer to a consecrated ritual partner of the Beast, an epithet applied only to Crowley, some Scarlet Women were associated not only with Babalon but also with Nuit, making it easy to conflate the role of the Scarlet Woman with the Priestess of the Gnostic Mass. For example, Crowley called Leila Waddell the "Mother of Heaven" and Leah Hirsig referred to herself in terms used for Nuit in *The Book of the Law*, writing once while very ill: "I die, not as you imagine through neglect by him but in service to the Work which we united to do. He and I are One, nay are None."[66]

The Priestesses of the Agapé Lodge: Defining the Role

In 1920, Crowley started the Abbey of Thelema with Leah Hirsig in a rented villa at Cefalù on the north coast of Sicily; the *Collegium ad Spiritum Sanctum* would be the

[65] Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 209-210. However, photographs reproduced in *Perdurabo* by Kaczynski from the review of the Rites of Eleusis in *The Bystander*, on October 12, 1910 show the Virgin Mother of Eternity sitting on the altar. The caption in the review reads: "Artemis is being invoked by Pan. The former is the mysterious Virgin Mother of Eternity and Pan is the Holy Spirit of Matter, from which their union springs Humanity, the crown child of future – and all that." Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, photographs.

[66] Hirsig survived. Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 415. From *The Book of the Law* (*Liber AL* I:27) and spoken by the Priest in the Gnostic Mass on the first step of the altar: "Then the Priest answered & said unto the Queen of Space, kissing her lovely brows, and the dew of her light bathing his whole body in a sweet-smelling perfume of sweat: O Nuit, continuous one of Heaven, let it be ever thus; that men speak not of Thee as One but as None; and let them speak not of thee at all, since thou art continuous!"

site of a training program for the realization of the New Aeon.[67] That same year, forty-five year old American film star and longtime letter correspondent Jane Wolfe (1875-1958) arrived to study with Crowley. She worked with him for three years at the Abbey (not as a Scarlet Woman but as a student) and later with others in Paris, keeping a magical diary of her efforts, studying and meditating intensely, recruiting students, and typing transcripts.[68] In late 1927, she went home to Los Angeles and began work with the existing Thelemic community run by Wilfred T. Smith. Wolfe worked with Smith as his female magical partner in O.T.O. sex rituals comparable to the Gnostic Mass, which inspired him to continue advancing Thelema and provided insight into Crowley's work at the Abbey.[69] She maintained contact with Crowley by letter and often acted as intermediary between Crowley and Smith, in some cases directing Smith on behalf of Crowley.[70] According to Martin Starr, W.T. Smith's biographer, Wolfe had been interested in working as the acknowledged Scarlet Woman for Crowley and then as a comparable partner for Smith but in both cases other women had been preferred.[71]

Wolfe is an interesting example, not only of an experienced and valued female magician, but also of the apparent desirability of the title "Scarlet Woman" for women and the association of that title with additional requirements beyond effective sex magic

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[67] The altar in the temple room at the Abbey of Thelema is described as centered in the room, six-sided, with six candles and *The Book of the Law*, suggesting that if the Gnostic Mass was performed at the Abbey, it might have performed differently. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 280.

[68] Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 394.

[69] Starr, *Unknown God*, 178, 191-192; Note: The 9th degree is known as the "Sovereign Sanctuary of the Gnosis."

[70] Ibid., 171.

[71] Ibid., 181.

ritual or priestessing in the Gnostic Mass, characteristics perhaps determined by charisma and "sex appeal."[72] That the attributes of a Scarlet Woman include visual attractiveness might be seen in Crowley's unkind comment in his diary when he first met his "movie star" in 1920: "I am like a girl who was to meet a 'dark distinguished gentleman' and did, he was a nigger with one eye."[73] Later, however, in *The Diary of a Drug Fiend* (1922), he would describe Wolfe's appearance with genuine respect:

> She had a curious mouth, with square-cut lips like one sees in some old Egyptian statues, and a twist at the corners in which lurked incalculable possibilities of self-expression. Her eyes were deep-set and calm. It was a square face with a very peculiar jaw expressing terrific determination. I have never seen a face in which courage was so strongly marked.[74]

In 1928, W.T. Smith was to write to his estranged wife that "with J. Wolfe there is no personal attraction but I can spend many hours in conversation as I would a man."[75] Although Wolfe would perform as Priestess in the Gnostic Mass in the 1930s, alternating with Smith's main Priestess, Regina Kahl, she would not be perceived as either a Scarlet Woman or Smith's true magical partner. In 1943, Crowley exiled Smith from the O.T.O., using Wolfe as the go-between. In response to her greater responsibilities and sense of purpose, she finally simply declared herself to Smith a Scarlet Woman, presumably without consecration.[76] Unfortunately, Smith was inactive as Priest for the next five years

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[72] Ibid., 197.

[73] On arrival at the Abbey, Wolfe was equally repelled. Crowley, from his diary, November , 1920, quoted in Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 364. Wolfe, without source, described in Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 364.

[74] Crowley, from *The Diary of a Drug Fiend* (London: W. Collins Sons & Co., 1922), quoted in Starr, *Unknown God*, 171. According to Starr, Wolfe was the basis of a character in the book, Sister Athena.

[75] Starr, *Unknown God*, 174.

[76] Ibid., 281. She was 67.

and when he started performing the Gnostic Mass again in 1948, it was with Helen Parsons as Priestess and Wolfe as Deacon.[77]

During the most active performance period of the Gnostic Mass at the Agapé Lodge (1933-1942), Smith's primary magical partner and Priestess in the Gnostic Mass was Regina Kahl. She was a mezzo soprano and voice instructor who ran a popular literary salon with her sister. She and her sister both joined the O.T.O. in 1927, but it was Kahl who would magnetically draw crowds to Thelema through the Gnostic Mass. This ability to be charismatic is an important part of the role of occult leaders and as Wolfe wrote to Crowley, "[I]t is Kahl that everyone hails at the Monday at-homes. Kahl is all emotion, and flows out to everyone, you bathe in her warmth."[78] Although Kahl was liberal sexually and openly bisexual, on Crowley's advice she focused her sexual energies solely on Thelema and especially on Smith.[79] As soon as she, Smith and Wolfe secured a common house ("profess house") in which to stage the Gnostic Mass, she began hosting social events with Thelemic themes such as "Crowley Nights" and the anniversary of *The Book of the Law*.[80] After great effort to construct the temple space and gather the materials needed, plus two private Masses each Sunday with Kahl and Wolfe alternating as Priestess, the first public Gnostic Mass in America was performed on March 10, 1933, with Smith and Kahl as Priest and Priestess.[81] Crowley greatly admired

[77] Ibid., 321, 192.

[78] Ibid., 182-184.

[79] Ibid., 181, 185.

[80] Ibid., 190.

[81] Ibid., 192-193.

the photographs of the Mass sent to him and encouraged Smith to focus primarily on the public Mass as a way to entice new members and perhaps patrons.[82] Smith and Kahl were not only the primary Priest and Priestess of the Gnostic Mass, but they were also the leaders of the Thelemic organization in Los Angeles, directing others, mediating conflicts and even defying Crowley at times.[83] Underlying the authority of leadership, ritual space and the communal setting was a strong spiritual connection. In 1939, an O.T.O. member described a Gnostic Mass performed outdoors on a piece of land they hoped to develop as a magical retreat:

> We had no paraphernalia. We circumscribed a Temple among the rocks. We used a rock for an altar. Another for a tomb. For a robe, Wilfred [Smith] had an old army overcoat that we found there. For his crown, some leaves intertwined. For the lance, a stick of wood. … Wilfred so intense, so reverent, so impressed with the solemnity of the whole ritual that it literally tore him apart. Regina [Kahl] couldn't go through her love-chant due to emotional choke-up. Wilfred, in an old army overcoat and some ridiculous leaves on his bald head, looking, acting, feeling every inch the Priest. The finest rendition of the Mass I ever saw him give.[84]

By late 1941, however, Smith was ready for a new magical partner and found her in Helen Parsons, Jack Parsons' estranged wife.[85] According to Martin Starr, Smith had begun to find Kahl energetically draining and over-emotional; furthermore, within the year her high blood pressure and ill health would cause her to retire to a friend's house

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[82] Ibid., 194.

[83] Ibid., 195, 201.

[84] Roy Leffingwell to Crowley, September 1, 1939, quoted in Starr, *Unknown God*, 250.

[85] Jack Parsons (1914-1952) was rocket engineer and member of the O.T.O. who later blew himself up in a rocket fuel accident in his garage, which I was told by a nonlocal Thelemite is commonly thought to the result of a Babalon invocation. For more details about Parsons and his later magical partner, artist Marjorie Cameron, see Starr, *Unknown God*, 313, 320-328.

for extended rest.[86] In a complicated open-marriage arrangement, Jack Parsons left Helen for her sister Sara and broken-hearted Helen settled in with Smith, while at the same time Jack and Helen together rented a new home for the profess house. By June 1942, the new profess house was dedicated and open, but the space for the Gnostic Mass would remain unused.[87] Over the next six years, weak leadership, in-fighting, exile and death would diminish the lodge membership almost completely. In 1948, Smith and Helen resumed the Gnostic Mass at their private residence with the assistance of other members and visitors, performing it at least until 1955.[88] What stands out in the history of the Gnostic Mass in the Agapé Lodge period is the loyal dedication of a few people: W.T. Smith, Jane Wolfe, Regina Kahl and Helen Parsons Smith. While these four were certainly supported by members and friends, it was the commitment and leadership of one Priest and three Priestesses which enabled the ritual's continued performance. So little has been publicly written about these three women and their experience with the Gnostic Mass that an in-depth study would significantly contribute to the understanding of the role of the Priestess in the Gnostic Mass.[89]

Modern E.G.C. Priestesses: Voices of Experience

While there is a tremendous amount of material about Aleister Crowley in print and online, there is much less about the O.T.O. and even less about the E.G.C. and the Gnostic Mass. Further, although there has been a movement recently among academics in

[86] Starr, *Unknown God*, 271, 280.

[87] Ibid., 276.

[88] Ibid., 320, 326, 330.

[89] There do appear to be some materials available to members only and a book on the diaries of Jane Wolfe which is out-of-print and difficult to locate; however, there is certainly a need for a book similar to Mary K. Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses* (Rochester, VT: Part Street Press, 1995).

Western Esotericism to reexamine Crowley and his works within the context of Gnosticism, sex magic and sexual identity, liberation and utopianism, and new religious movements, there has been surprisingly little mention of female contributions. Only a few women stand out in the public history of the E.G.C.: Some of the Scarlet Women such as Rose Crowley, Leila Waddell and Leah Hirsig, the Priestesses of Agapé Lodge Regina Kahl and Helen Parsons Smith, the occult artist Marjorie Cameron,[90] and the grand dames of the O.T.O., Jane Wolfe and Phyllis Seckler. Current women leaders in the O.T.O. and the E.G.C. such as Bishops Lynn Scriven (Helena), Nancy Wasserman (Tau Mara) and Constance DuQuette have produced or contributed to additional related works such as videos, performance guides, articles and training seminars. Presumably there are additional women leading as bishops, Mass officers, and writers within the E.G.C., but, according to Brandy Williams, a long-standing O.T.O. prohibition against revealing the names of women members has obscured their contributions within the public arena.[91] Perhaps for the same reason, no women are included in the list of Saints given in the Gnostic Mass liturgy; however, at the O.T.O. Women's Conference in 1996, the E.G.C. Patriarch Hymenaeus Beta suggested that a woman may someday compose a gender-alternative Mass in which the list of Saints could include women:

> [The list of Saints] is a list of the small handful of men and man-gods who, in the opinion of the author of the Mass [Crowley], understood the divinity

[90] Marjorie Cameron (1922-1995) was an artist and film star who was perceived as an incarnation of Babalon by her husband Jack Parsons. After his death at home from a rocket fuel explosion, she went on to be a significant participant in Los Angeles art and culture.

[91] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass: Annotations and Commentary by Helena and Tau Apiryon," The Invisible Basilica of Sabazius. Last Accessed September 29, 2104. http://hermetic.com/sabazius/gmnotes.htm#credits; Brandy Williams, "Feminist Thelema," *Beauty and Strength: Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial National Ordo Templi Orientis Conference*, Salem, Massachusetts, August 10-12, 2007: 161-185.

> of woman … Someday, perhaps not soon, but who knows, a woman adept of the Sovereign Sanctuary will manifest the genius to compose a Mass in which the female takes the more active role, and the male the more passive (as with *siva* and *sakti* in Hinduism) – in which the Deacon speaking for the Priestess, can claim communion with the women in history that have perceived the divinity of man.[92]

This invisibility of women and their contributions to occultism is a general pattern: Women occultists who are well-known are those whose writings have been published, such as H.P. Blavatsky and Dion Fortune. Since the 1960s, there have been more magazines, nonacademic press and privately published publications focused on women's experiences in magical organizations, including Wicca and other neo-pagan traditions.[93] Recently, the Internet has greatly expanded the range of women's occult publishing through private websites, blogs and other social media. Although it is difficult to glean a fair representation of the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass from these sources, they do suggest certain patterns applicable to this research. In the selections below – two online articles, one blog and two articles in print anthologies – six women describe their experiences with the Gnostic Mass, which vary from abusive to inspiring. It should be noted, however, that it is often unclear how much of the Gnostic Mass experience is conflated with experience in the O.T.O., given that degrees in the O.T.O. are required for participation in the Gnostic Mass and, further, higher degrees not required to perform seem to inform an insider interpretation of the Gnostic Mass.

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[92] Capitalization and punctuation as given. Hymenaeus Beta, quoted in Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," Saints. Note: He suggests that a Mass composed by women could switch the active and passive roles, but would still maintain gender polarity.

[93] *The Green Egg*, *Circle Magazine*, Llewellyn Worldwide, Inner Traditions (with Bear & Company), Avalonia, and Megalithica Books, for example.

Two of the six women highlighted do not appear to be Priestesses but all discuss the Gnostic Mass from the perspective of women and gender roles. The first, Psyche, is the editor of a website dedicated to occult subjects and describes herself as a "practicing magician of 15 years;" she joined the O.T.O. looking for an in-person community to share and learn with.[94] After early satisfaction with classes and events, she took the entry degree of the O.T.O. and discovered that the central O.T.O. ritual, the Gnostic Mass, required fixed gender roles:

> Over the next few months, further explorations of these mysteries revealed equally rigid views on the (few) roles permitted to women, and they were almost always passive. If you didn't identify as a Scarlet Woman, a Whore of Babalon, there wasn't much room for you in the temple. I found this incredibly frustrating. It made no sense biologically, and even less sense magically. Questions about gender fluidity, intersex, trans- and other non-cis-, non-binary, non-hetero identified people were met with incomprehension. Try as I might, I couldn't reconcile the official OTO stance on gender essentialism and the restrictive boundaries it policed with reality. So, I left …
>
> I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Crowley repeatedly describes Thelema as a solar-phallic cult, and *The Book of the Law* doesn't have much going on for its goddess — the primary figures are all designated as male, but, still, I expected more. I had hoped with the progress that's been made over the past 40 years with LGBTQ rights that there'd be some reflection of that in the order. With the progress feminism has made, and still struggles with, I thought there'd be more consideration for diversity. I expected the religion (or philosophy or whatever you want to call it) would have evolved over the past hundred years. But it hasn't. Magick might be about change, but Thelema's imagery and understanding of its central mysteries remain in stasis.[95]

Although her blog commentators reminded Psyche that the Mass is a heterosexual ritual and historically determined, O.T.O. member Krissy Elliott responded more fully:

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[94] Psyche, "Why I Left the O.T.O." Spiral Nature, last accessed on September 30, 2014, http://www.spiralnature.com/magick/left-ordo-templi-orientis.html.

[95] Ibid.

> Crowley's writing was a product of its time – he had inherited wealth and didn't need to work, for the larger part of his life women didn't even have the vote. In that respect, his inclusion of women in any way is commendable, and would at the time have been a departure indeed from the status quo, and thereby challenging social norms.
>
> As far as 21st century OTO goes – and I can only speak for my own experience and not the Order's official stance – as members we have discussed at length the issues faced by LGBT members with regard to the Gnostic Mass, and quite simply are agreed that any such member should be allowed to perform a role in Mass which best befits the gender with which they identify primarily. This is about energy, polarity, receptivity, drive towards that goal. So a gay guy who identifies with female qualities more than male in his psyche would be welcome to Priestess at Gnostic Mass with us. And so on.
>
> When people get so fixated on the sex business, they forget utterly that energy and Magick transcend gender, and in actual fact it's the flow of energy from Hadit to be at one with Nuit that we illustrate in Mass. In this case it's represented by masculine and feminine, because it was written at a time when that was how it would be seen symbolically. It's symbolic, that's the point – but any group of people is allowed to choose its boundaries and definitions, so I think it's OK for the OTO to choose to retain masculine and feminine, to keep Crowley's work intact.[96]

Psyche responded to Ms. Elliott by mentioning that she did not consider her experience with the O.T.O. to be negative but rather felt frustrated with "the gender essentialism that doesn't make any sense:"

> I feel I should also mention that women magicians weren't exactly new in Crowley's time. There were numerous prominent women on the scene, such as Maud Gonne, Moina Bergson Mathers, Annie Horniman, Florence Farr, Helena Blavatsky, Pamela Colman Smith, Ida Craddock, Maria de Naglowska, and so on. I don't see much of a departure in his inclusion of women in the OTO. It's certainly not progressive, at least, not any more so than what was already going on in the Golden Dawn and co-masonry. The defined gender roles are a step back, if anything.
>
> Again, thanks for your comments, but I still see a problem with the gender essentialism you're describing here. What if a member is intersex?

[96] Kristy Elliott, blog response, June 19, 2014, quoted in Psyche, "Why I Left," http://www.spiralnature.com/magick/left-ordo-templi-orientis.html.

> Genderqueer? Agender? What if they don't fit this rigid party line, as so many don't? This polarity doesn't make sense on a biological level, never mind a magical one and I don't understand the reason it's clung to so desperately. It's beyond outdated … If the symbols are no longer deemed effective — culturally, biologically, psychically — why continue with them? [97]

Another ex-member of the O.T.O., Soror Bitshtar, wrote an article about sexual harassment in the O.T.O. which was published on the website of Peter Koenig, an occult ethnologist who joined several magical orders (including the O.T.O.) as a covert researcher.[98] She describes her own and other women's experiences as victims of sexual and power exploitation, claiming that "the position of women within the Order has been predominately a passive one; the most glaring example of that is the role of the Priestess within the Gnostic Mass."[99] She notes that while women have made advances in the last hundred years which seem to confirm the New Aeon promised in *The Book of the Law*, the role of women in Thelema has not significantly changed:

> Young women who come into contact with Thelema today have to deal with several obstacles, namely: a lack of more specific data and anecdotal female initiatic experiences (including experiences relating to the IX* Grade, its operation, and its perspective from the female operator); the inherent sexism within Crowley's writings; and, and most importantly, a certain "abuse" of power by certain males within the O.T.O. This abuse of power, appears to be in absolute contradiction with the tenet, "Every man and every woman is a star" which strikes a chord in the heart of every woman who comes into contact with Thelema. This abuse of power also indicates that the O.T.O is not exempt from the type of abuse that occurs within other mundane organizations. On the contrary, the OTO could provide a fertile ground for "insecure boys" or "sick old men." These unfit

[97] Punctuation as given. Psyche, blog response to Kristy Elliott, June 19, 2014, quoted in Psyche, "Why I Left," http://www.spiralnature.com/magick/left-ordo-templi-orientis.html.

[98] Soror Bitshtar, "A Personal Account of Sexual Harassment: Papageno Strikes Back, but the Bitch is Alive," Ordo Templi Orientis Phenomenon, last accessed September 29, 2014, http://www.parareligion.ch/papa.htm.

[99] Ibid., [2]

> individuals tend to overtly diminish the importance of females members within "their" chapters or lodges, or if their importance is at all acknowledged, it is often through their "objectification," either through "initiatory" sex rituals, and other such "favors."[100]

During her membership tenure in which she gained a high degree in the O.T.O., Soror Bitshtar became frustrated with her role as "primadona" and her lack of meaningful work in the lodge. She states that questions about ritual were answered by the phrase, "Don't worry: You are already a goddess," and suggestions that as a woman she was "naturally initiated." She states:

> Many women might fall into the trap of being treated as "naturally" initiated. This assumption represents, on the contrary of a privilege, a trap in the sense that your female physiology makes you initiated since you bleed monthly, you reproduce, etc. The flip side of this assumption is that women are not allowed to do certain things.

She claims that one of the main problems for women in Thelema is that there are few female role models other than the Scarlet Women, whose diaries she feels tend to be shallow and inconsistent. She describes Jane Wolfe as "a woman who was not 'feminine' looking enough to fit within the standards of a Lodge 'goddess'" but an important female Thelemite; however, she points out that too little information on Wolfe is available.[101] She suggests that the "myths" and "inherent sexism" about the role of women in the O.T.O. need to be examined and "deconstructed" in order to attract additional intelligent women and "to empower female members by letting them play active key leadership roles within their Order."[102]

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[100] Soror Bitshtar appends a footnote to this paragraph which states, "Perhaps, young homosexual males experience a similar scenario, but this article is too specific to address this issue." Ibid., [3].

[101] Ibid., [4]

[102] "Myths" in quotes in text. Ibid., [4].

In contrast, Soror LA finds empowerment in the New Aeon of Thelema in which the "exploration, experimentation, and growth" of the individual is valued.[103] She states that by identifying with the sun as a "Solar Being", one is able to look outward into the starry night to realize that "every man and every woman is a star."[104] In the old Aeon, women became "sub-human," and "vehicles for man's destiny" once men realized the role of insemination in conception.[105] According to Soror LA, this view of women and of sexuality led to sexual violence and dysfunction wherein "the beauty and selflessness of the Union have been turned into a hideous crime against God."[106] Using an example of two women who are assaulted, she suggests that the one who places her faith in a "far away god" does not learn to defend herself, whereas the woman who is armed with "the sword of knowledge" defends herself and escapes.[107] Magick differs from religion because there is an "uncompromising freedom in choosing your will, and unrelenting responsibility for having done so."[108] Soror LA claims that a Thelemic woman is the "warrior Priestess of the New Aeon" who is "a vehicle that is free to do her Will to usher in the Law of Thelema."[109] The Thelemic woman obtains the training necessary to break moral codes and the bondage of slavery, seeking to "reclaim her fertility to bring forth a

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[103] Soror LA, "Thelemic Women in the New Aeon," The Website of Soror LA [Elizabeth Long], last accessed September 29, 2014, http://www.castletower.org/thelemicwomen.html, [3].

[104] Ibid., [2].

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid., [3].

[109] Ibid.

new generation of freedom."[110] She explains that while men and women are equals who "do not conform to some artificial role prepackaged for us and chosen because of the shape of our sex organs," for Thelemic women, gender roles are not necessarily limiting but may express "the divinity inherent in every man and woman" which is the Will:

> Thelemic women in the New Aeon are Goddesses, yes. She is the gentle soul of Nuit that is the infinite source of joy, pleasure, and nourishment. Thelemic women are Scarlet Women who are the vehicle for divine inspiration of their own genius whose core burn with the blazing fires of lust, yes. She is the one who rides upon the Beast. Thelemic women are as Nature; to create without discrimination and give birth to creation without the clouding of the ego. Thelemic women are of the moon; the absolute feminine and passivity to the intensity of their counterparts, the males who are of the sun. But what makes a Thelemic woman different in this Aeon is she is the Warrior Priestess of Ra-Hoor-Khuit, the God of war and vengeance. She stands in the temple to do her work girt with a devastating sword. She stands fearless and shameless before all men. She enjoys all things of rapture and joy. She lusts after all the splendor the world had to offer her and she actively seeks those rewards. She accepts the responsibility of her freedom and takes control of the world's influence over her.[111]

In "Are Ingredients Important?" Shellay Maughan, a Priestess and lodge master of the O.T.O., a student of Magick for over forty years, and a founding member of the Dianic Women of the Goddess, questions the necessity of standard materials used at exact astrological moments in perfectly performed ritual.[112] Since she uses a different recipe for Abramelin oil (a key ingredient in the Cakes of Light) than the one Crowley had, she wonders if it will have different properties and effects. Although she is careful with her translations and preparations, she suggests that perhaps exact ingredients are

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[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid., [3] and [4].

[112] Shellay Maughan, "Are Ingredients Important?" In *Women's Voices in Magic*, ed. Brandy Williams (Stafford, UK: Megalithica Books, 2009), 59.

inspiring to the practitioner but not essential to the work. Magick, Maughan claims, comes from within; it is an internal facility which, like talent, is cultivated by refining skill.[113] Going further, she says that "nature is Magick incarnate" in which every force and object of nature, including scents and sounds, have energetic properties which can strengthen or weaken ritual intentions.[114] Making the effort to perfect intention by memorizing and practicing polishes the magician's skills, just like using good tools embellishes art, which she compares to performance in the Gnostic Mass:

> To me, it's art. Performing the Gnostic Mass [a] hundredth time is like performing Macbeth or playing Bach. I didn't write it and can't change it, but I love to interpret it, and to work on the power of my performance. Familiarity is part of the power of these rituals – there's a deep well of stored potency and meaning in a ritual that has been worked over and over for years. I love the obscure and the complex for its own sake – a beautiful filigreed puzzle. Exploring whether a resin from Iran is better than a resin from Thailand is interesting in its own right. Will my ritual work if I use them interchangeably? Sure. It'll probably work if I leave them out completely, although I may need to focus harder. On the flip side, an ingredient whose properties work against the ritual can be overcome, or ignored. But I avoid those situations as much as I can. Not because I think the ingredients create the Magick, but because the right tools and scents and colors work with me to add grace and beauty and depth.[115]

In *Priestesses, Pythonesses, Sibyls: The Sacred Voices of Women Who Speak with and for the Gods* (2008), Cathryn Orchard, a member of the O.T.O., a Priestess in the Gnostic Mass, and Secretary of Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica in the United Kingdom (as of 2012), describes her first experience attending the Gnostic Mass and her early training as a Priestess. She says before her first Gnostic Mass as a congregant, she was concerned

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[113] Ibid., 60.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid., 60-61.

that the Mass might be too structured and thus distance her from the direct experience of the gods that she previously experienced.[116] Instead, she was swept up by the ritual which seemed to enhance her direct connection: "Just before taking communion, I saw what I felt to be a great strength in the Priestess's eyes, and really felt that she was in direct contact with … something infinite … Knowing how it made me feel to stand there, I felt strongly that I wanted to be able to provide that service for others."[117] Nonetheless, she points out that this service is not passively accepting but actively receptive:

> When it comes to performing the Gnostic Mass, I have a great certainty in the ritual itself and its ability to create that connection with the divine forces … That's not to say that I do nothing at all. I want to make sure that everything is perfectly set up beforehand, that I know the ritual completely in my mind and in my body, and have a certainty in my ability to be open to the forces called in. Then I can mentally step back and allow these things to happen. It is not a passive process but one of being actively receptive … Even during my very first Mass as Priestess, I began to feel that things were slipping into place without me really trying. The forces worked through me without me controlling them, and it was through my letting go of control that made the way for ritual to do its thing. I felt a sense of doing but not-doing, removing my own self from the situation, so that it is not my ego that does the work but something deeper. [118]

For Orchard, preparation before the Mass and the participation of the congregation both contribute to the invocation of Nuit. She says that the presence of the congregation "elevates me from being a magician seeking a connection with the divine, to a Priestess seeking that connection in the service of others."[119] Although she calls it a "powerful invocation and a strong possession," she describes the connection as gnostic, rather

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[116] Cathryn Orchard, "Gnostic Priestess in the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica," In *Priestesses Pythonesses Sibyls*, ed. Sorita d'Este (London: Avalonia, 2008), 96.

[117] Ibid., 97.

[118] Ibid., 99.

[119] Ibid., 100.

anthropomorphized, which makes her more aware of her place within Nuit, rather than trying to make room for the infinite night sky within her.[120] She describes this feeling connection and wholeness:

> The power of pulling those forces inside of myself and seeing myself inside of those forces has left me feeling truly gnostic. It has left me with a sense of finding a place in the world, of being that one star in the Universe, by looking directly into the darkness, which is never as dark as it seems. I feel infinitesimally small and able to marvel at how wondrous it is to be part of the infinitely huge whole. And I can see that divinity, refracted in all people, see each person I encounter as a star in the body of Nuit, equally small and hugely part of everything.[121]

Orchard claims that by accepting recognition as Priestess, there is a responsibility outside of ritual to be a support and comfort to the community.[122] She points out that having a church creates structure and the opportunity for support from peers and guidance from clergy. For her, the Gnostic Catholic Church is "not simply a building in which people congregate but a body of people working together for a spiritual purpose."[123]

Feminist Thelema and Invisible Women

While these six sources – Psyche and Krissy Elliott, Soror Bitshtar, Soror LA, Shellay Maughan, and Cathryn Orchard – provide scarce insights into the personal experiences of women associated with the Gnostic Mass, the publicly-available scholarly sources are even rarer. Brandy Williams has examined the apparent tension between feminism and traditional magical groups in her article "Feminist Thelema," presented at

[120] Ibid., 100.

[121] Ibid., 101.

[122] Ibid., 102.

[123] Ibid., 102.

the O.T.O. national convention in 2007. Williams states that although she had had a previous interest in feminism, she had set it aside in the late 1970's because the feminist movement had taken a "regrettable sex negative turn."[124] She first began to consider magic from a feminist viewpoint in 1985 as a participant in a small, private group called the Feminist Qabalist Collective.[125] The group worked enthusiastically for a year before disbanding but the ideas she learned and shared continued to germinate for the next twenty years.[126] About 2005, she reconnected with feminist writings of Robin Morgan, Rita Gross and others in order to try to articulate her developing ideas.[127] Her background makes her well-suited to initiate discussion in this area since she is also a Priestess with the E.G.C. and a past lodge master in the O.T.O. Additionally, she is also a member in an Hermetic order derived from the Open Source Order of the Golden Dawn, a founding member of the Coven of the Mystical Merkabah, and a former national president of the Covenant of the Goddess.[128]

In "Feminist Thelema," Williams asks the question, "Why do some people consider Thelema in general, and O.T.O. in particular, to be sexist when Thelema and the Order explicitly include women?"[129] She examined the doctrines and practices of the

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[124] Brandy Williams, "The Feminist Adept," In *Women's Voices in Magic*, edited by Brandy Williams (Stafford, UK: Megalithica Books, 2009), 138.

[125] Ibid., 181.

[126] Ibid., 182.

[127] Ibid., 183.

[128] Ibid., 189.

[129] Brandy Williams, "Feminist Thelema," *Beauty and Strength: Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial National Ordo Templi Orientis Conference*, Salem, Massachusetts, August 10-12, 2007, 161.

O.T.O. and of Thelema for evidence of women's history, activities, authority and writing. She notes that while Thelemic spirituality honors female sexuality and motherhood, there are concerns whether there are roles for women other than lover or mother and whether women's sexuality and fertility is ultimately directed, used or owned by men.[130] Williams points out that attributing the letters of the Tetragrammaton (*YHVH*, used to indicate divinity as infinite totality) to the Thelemic theology of the Gnostic Mass "encodes patriarchal and gender polarity assumptions":

> Each of the four letters correspond to Thelemic deities. *Yod* is Hadit, *Heh* is Nuit, *Vau* is the union of Hadit and Nuit, and the final *Heh* is the product of the union. *Yod* is the King, wedded to *Heh*, the Queen, producing the prince and heir, *Vau*, and the princess, who is the final *Heh* … This construction privileges the male in a number of ways. First, in primacy of order. The formulation is always king, queen, prince, princess, never queen king, princess, prince. Also in this construction the female principles are defined by their relationship to the male. The king rules, his heir is the prince, the Queen's job is to produce the heir, and the princess is variously described as the result of the union and/or the destined bride of the prince. The heir is always the prince, and male; the princess is herself never heir.[131]

She argues that while the Law of Thelema supports gender unity and is written in gender neutral language ("Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the law, love under will."), many of Crowley's rituals were written from a male perspective with terms specific to male anatomy (the phallus) and male experience (father, king).[132] Women who participate in these rituals must "read themselves into the text," translating text and images referring to the male operator into concepts which include them and relate to their

[130] Ibid., 170, 181.

[131] Ibid., 171-172.

[132] Ibid., 177.

experience.[133] Williams states that Crowley "valorizes semen" as the active imprinter of life on the passive female blood or egg, and his writings reinforce that "women cannot create, and so a woman cannot reach magical attainment."[134] By associating fire and air with the masculine, and water and earth with the feminine, gender polarity is reinforced by ritual because fire and air are often designated as more energetic or more refined elements than water and earth.[135] Although Williams says that O.T.O. women participate significantly (but not equally) in authority, she says that one result of this underlying gender imbalance is that Thelemic women rarely speak or write publicly.[136] Claiming that "women's history disappears if it is not made public," she argues that biographies and images of women in leadership should be developed and Thelemic writers other than Crowley should be examined.[137] Williams notes that Feminist Thelemites are developing a new formula by researching, experimenting and reinterpreting the Thelemic gods, especially the goddesses Nuit and Babalon.[138] She emphasizes that although insider interpretations suggest that Thelemic philosophy – if not Crowley's personal life and writings – supports feminism, the work now is to illustrate publicly that "Thelema as it is practiced today is intellectually, magically, and spiritually empowering to women."[139]

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[133] Ibid., 178, 180.

[134] Ibid., 179.

[135] Ibid., 180.

[136] Ibid., 165, 180.

[137] Ibid., 182, 184.

[138] Ibid., 172-173.

[139] Ibid., 183.

Williams presented "Feminist Thelema" in various versions at local and national conferences and was largely well-received; however, over time she noticed a peculiar backlash from magical women who "directly acted to block my access to information, to reject proposals to speak, to frame my experience as personal issues rather than indications of problems in the magical systems, and to reject my offer of feminist sisterhood."[140] While it might seem that women in magical communities would embrace feminism, given that many are already making nonconformist decisions about their lives, Williams suggests that women who have a found a place in traditional magical groups may resist change. Those who challenge the current roles for women in these groups may become the focus of criticism and ostracization by other women as a method to protect and enforce established meaning:

> It should not have come as a surprise to me that women in traditional magical groups would act in the same ways as women in other traditional cultures. Traditional magical women may act to protect the position of being a singular woman in a male-dominated group, trade on the sexuality which some groups emphasize as woman's most important power, critique and suppress challenges to the established hierarchy, and fail to respond to the pain and requests for support of the women around them. Also, women who have invested years or lives into a system may find it difficult to understand challenges to that system – it may feel personal to them, as if they themselves are under attack.[141]

Williams suggests that the essential act of feminism is to "contest privilege in ourselves and the world," or to question the often hidden role of sex, gender and hierarchy.[142] Self-examination leads to knowledge and empathy for others, the ability to be truly

[140] Williams, "Feminist Adept," 184.

[141] Ibid., 186.

[142] Ibid., 188.

compassionate and make space for people to create who they are. Above all, the feminist adept must speak and write in order to make visible the hidden and to contribute meaningfully to the change they seek.[143]

Since "Feminist Thelema," Williams has gone on to write *The Woman Magician: Revisioning Western Metaphysics from a Woman's Perspective and Experience* in which she reimagines the Western magical tradition as a female-centered path of wisdom she calls "Magia Femina."[144] Drawing on gender studies, emerging women's spirituality, magical ritual and personal journaling, she attempts to reorient tradition, history, philosophy, science, culture, theology and magic for herself and for other women magicians. In the chapter called "Lady Tradition," Williams discusses Thelemic rituals including the Gnostic Mass. She describes the Gnostic Mass as "a very early example of the veneration of the divine feminine which developed in the modern era," in which the seated Priestess is "the focus of adoration" and "the visible manifestation of the female power of reproduction."[145]

As part of her discussion, Williams narrates the Gnostic Mass from her perspective as an E.G.C. Priestess from Washington State. She describes greeting the congregation and accepting their acknowledgement of her as their Priestess, after which

[143] Ibid.

[144] Brandy Williams, *The Woman Magician: Revisioning Western Metaphysics from a Woman's Perspective and Experience* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2011), back cover.

[145] Ibid., 37.

she begins her serpentine dance, accompanied by Turkish dance music.[146] She raises the Priest, who leads her to the altar and helps her sit. The Priest adoringly kisses her feet:

> This a very intimate moment, so it could be awkward, but I have never found it so, even working for the first time with a Priest I don't know well. Partly this is because it isn't me and my guy performing the ritual; it is the Priest and the Priestess, who are quasi-magical beings in their own right and have specific things to do with each other. Partly this is because the ritual is so solemn and majestic, and the people participating in it are so sincere, that it is sobering and exalting to perform.[147]

Behind the veil, she disrobes and stands naked while the Priest invokes Nuit.[148] For her, a familiar sense of channeling begins: She feels Nuit as a presence in the front of her head and says that Nuit speaks directly to the Priest and to the congregation, sometimes focusing imaginatively on a particular person from behind the veil.[149] While seated on the altar during communion, her Priest typically stands next to her rather in front of her, although she says that the location of the Priest might vary.[150] As the congregants approach her while seated on the altar, some act as worshippers, and as other Priestesses have said to her, she may "hear" Nuit in her mind speaking to individual congregants.[151] If she later gives that message to the congregant, they usually are unsurprised by the content. After the veil closes, she feels a release of energy.[152] Williams observes that after

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[146] Ibid., 30.

[147] Ibid., 32.

[148] Ibid., 32-33. In this case, she reseats herself before the veil is opened.

[149] Ibid., 33.

[150] Ibid., 35.

[151] Ibid., 36.

[152] Ibid.

she received a higher degree in the O.T.O., she felt "spacier" and "sees a lot of floating lights" while seated on the altar during the communion.[153] Although she loves the magic of the Gnostic Mass, she points out that while the gendering of the Priestess and Priest roles "acknowledges the lived experience of the body" and may appear balanced, it is not equal.[154] The Priestess does not direct the work but supports it: She is the *soror mysticae*, the magician's sister and magical partner, "always the muse, but never the magician."[155]

In an effort to remove the "male lens" from her view of the sacred universe, Williams also practices traditional Witchcraft with a coven, which identifies deity with two equal aspects, male and female. However, she observes that female power in Witchcraft is associated strongly with fertility and, as a childless mature woman, she feels a stronger identification with Babalon, "the unbridled lover."[156] Williams claims that while Witchcraft provides power, connection and experience, it does not encourage individual exploration or intellectual study. She says: "While I am a woman, and I am a magician, in these rituals I do not experience myself as a woman and also as a magician at the same time."[157] Ultimately, she says that to express herself as a woman magician she feels she must create rituals taken from women-centered theology and a female-only

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid., 37.

[155] Ibid., 38 and back cover.

[156] Ibid., 41.

[157] Ibid., 43.

cosmology so that women may revision themselves into the act of creation, without relationship to the male.[158] Williams explains:

> The experience of working ritual that envisions the universe and the magician as female is empowering and healing. I work a number of magical systems and groups that include men, systems that imagine some, most, or all forces of the universe as male, but I carry myself differently in the world now because I have stepped through rites where the face of fire, sun, creator, cosmos, magician is a female face.[159]

Previous Fieldwork: Gender and the Gnostic Mass

Although there have been an increasing number of scholarly examinations of Aleister Crowley and his work which might provide insight into the history of the Gnostic Mass, two fieldwork research projects examined the practice and interpretation of current members. The first is a dissertation by Claudia Kowalchyk, "A Study of Two 'Deviant' Religious Groups: The Assemblies of God and the Ordo Templi Orientis," published by New York University in 1994. While Kowalchyk focuses primarily on cult characteristics and social stigma experienced by members of the O.T.O. as compared to The Assemblies of God, she does present firsthand accounts about the role of Thelema in the lives of O.T.O. members.[160] Over the period of a year in New York, she participated as a congregant in the Gnostic Mass and interviewed twenty members of the O.T.O., using a lengthy list of questions including personal background and social interaction in

[158] Ibid., 181.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Although this dissertation cannot be fully described here, the comparison produces some very interesting insights about self-identification, reinforcement of doctrine, internal cohesion in reaction to external stigma, individualism and will, the consequences of power, and the social and psychological benefits of membership.

the order, in the community and at work.[161] During this process, she was invited but declined to train as a Priestess. She believed this invitation was made because of a shortage of women attracted to the Mass and willing to learn the role:

> The Order suffers from a dearth of Priestesses. It is a challenging role to play that invokes a good deal of memorization. Secondly, some members are not overly fond of the Mass, preferring to engage in other group activities instead. The reason most often given for disliking the Mass is that it is too reminiscent of Catholic Masses.[162]

The majority of those she interviewed had joined the O.T.O. after seeing a public Gnostic Mass but without knowing any member, a process she called "love at first sight."[163] However, she noted that three women who had been introduced to the Gnostic Mass by their boyfriends had been originally reluctant take the first degree in the O.T.O. which Kowalchyk attributes to the fact that they had not taken the initiative as seekers.[164] When asked what aspects of the O.T.O. these members would change, they mentioned sexist language and expectations during the initiations, the lack of women in the list of Saints in the Gnostic Mass, exclusionary hierarchy, and oversensitivity to nudity not found in the skyclad Wiccan groups.[165] Kowalchyk notes that at the only public Gnostic Mass she attended in which the Priestess was naked, the Priestess was upset afterwards because she had perceived the inappropriate attention of a recent member.[166] In attempting to locate

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[161] Kowalchyk does not describe how many Masses she attended or her own experience of the Mass; however, she says she spent approximately ten hours a week during that year with members.

[162] Kowalchyk, "A Study of Two," 31. She did not accept the offer in order to preserve research neutrality.

[163] Ibid., 137.

[164] Ibid.

[165] Ibid., 161-165.

[166] Ibid., 165.

an underlying source of morality but recognizing that O.T.O. members hope to identify themselves as "of the Gods," Kowalchyk asked the members interviewed what images they used to represent God [*sic*]. She categorized the responses as three types: God is in all things including the mirror; God is unknowable so there can be no images; and lesser gods can be imaged but the supreme, transcendent force cannot.[167] Stating an opinion also held by some of the others, "Lilly" said, "If you can assign an image, you haven't got it yet." [168] One member, "Leo," also said:

> Images, images. Stars in the night sky. Flaming snake. And Horus. Horus is sort of my male sexual ideal which would kind of like be a lad in his late teens, early twenties with a gymnast's or swimmer's body and a hawk head. Or a girl. Sometimes Horus shows up with a female gender and gold skin usually, golden skin, and a hawk's head, male or female. Very pretty. Very pretty. Other images than that, would be men and women which surround me, which I walk past on the street. You sitting there in the chair, my face when I look in the mirror. That about covers it. I don't like to overdo it with this deity stuff anyway.[169]

All of the members Kowalchyk interviewed claimed to have always been "highly spiritual" and most described a "natural evolution" towards Thelema rather than sudden conversion; and further, the majority discovered Crowley long before finding a lodge.[170] This sense of seeking identity was part of a long movement away from family tradition, major religions, and social conformity to what they considered fulfillment of destiny.[171] She concludes that those attracted to the O.T.O. are "spiritual non-conformists with a will

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[167] Ibid., 213.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Ibid., 215.

[170] Ibid., 111, 140.

[171] Ibid., 120*ff.*

to power" who seek a religious perspective which does not subordinate them to anyone, even a god.[172] She emphasizes that the statement "Do what thou Wilt shall be the whole of the Law," does not mean "do anything one wants" but rather do what it is alignment with one's higher will, which is principally known through feelings fine-tuned by experimentation and observation.[173] She also observes that group acceptance of the personal will means that members are free to reject and/or not participate in the Gnostic Mass although it is officially the central public and private ritual of the O.T.O.[174] Although Kowalchyk examines the meaning and function of the will in regards to morality, she does not deeply examine the mythological basis of the Law of Thelema, which is found in *The Book of the Law*, or the outwardly visible ritual of Thelema, which is the Gnostic Mass. She briefly mentions that individuals may object to the nudity of the Priestess or to the Cakes of Light in the Mass, but does not give details, other than to mention that the Priestess' nudity is expected but not required and that she did observe some individuals leave before the Mass rather than take communion.[175] She frequently refers to sex magic in her study but, perhaps since her informants mention Crowley himself as the cause of negative societal opinion, she does not address the sex magic elements in the public Gnostic Mass from the perspective of stigma.[176] Finally, although Kowalchyk appears to have witnessed several Gnostic Masses, she does not discuss the

[172] Ibid., 133.

[173] Ibid., 230.

[174] Ibid., 415.

[175] Ibid., 30.

[176] Ibid., 377-383.

role of the Priestess (or Priest) from the perspective of gender role, internal stigma or possible conflicts with the alignment with personal Will to ritual requirements.[177]

The second fieldwork project which relates to this research is a master's thesis on the construction of gender in the O.T.O. by Manon Hedenborg-White entitled "To Him the Winged Secret Flame, to Her the Stooping Starlight: The Social Construction of Gender in Contemporary Ordo Templi Orientis," published at Stockholm University in 2013.[178] In order to examine the "multiple gender systems inherent in contemporary O.T.O.," Hedenborg-White visited five O.T.O. lodges in the United States during the Autumn of 2012, attending the Gnostic Mass at three of these, and participating in classes, workshops, seasonal rituals, and social events.[179] In addition, she participated in an annual two-day camping retreat called the Babalon Puja, which included an outdoor Gnostic Mass, rituals for the goddesses Hecate, Venus, Isis, Nephtys and Babalon, and drumming, chanting, invoking and channeling.[180] Although she formally interviewed four men and four women from seven different lodges who were all current or past Priests or Priestesses (two of which are also E.G.C. bishops), she also had "countless informal conversations with an even greater number of O.T.O. members about Thelema and magic

[177] For example, the stigma of the Priestess choosing to not be nude may result in that Mass being labeled "barbarous" or "savage". Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 82-83.

[178] Manon Hedenborg-White, "To Him the Winged Secret Flame, To Her the Stooping Starlight: The Social Construction of Gender in Contemporary Ordo Templi Orientis," MA Thesis, Stockholm University, 2013. This thesis was sent to me by a nonlocal Thelemite after my research project had been designed, approved and begun, but due to similarities in these two projects there will be a further discussion in Chapter Four comparing methods and analyses.

[179] Hedenborg-White, "To Him the Winged," 19-20.

[180] Ibid., 20-21, n31. One ritual was described. According to Hedenborg-White, the Puja participants could "pass beneath a black veil symbolizing crossing the Abyss" and by pouring some wine into the "Cup of Babalon," an act of surrender, were welcomed into the City of the Pyramids, the home of adepts who have conquered Chaos.

in general."[181] As sources, she also refers to performance guides, articles, books and podcasts which provided background information and further insights.[182] Unlike Kowalchyk, Hedenborg-White does not give direct quotes obtained from a formal interview process but instead provides paraphrased responses gleaned from recorded and unrecorded open interviews which have pre-selected themes but no formal list of questions.[183] While Hedenborg-White accurately points out that there are "limited scholarly precedents," she anchors her work within relevant academic and theoretical discourse, including the work of Hugh Urban, Alex Owen and Judith Butler. Her fieldwork data is presented in four sections – Masculinity and femininity as metaphysical concepts; Gender in the Gnostic Mass; Gender and power; and Sexuality – followed by a discussion chapter.

Hedenborg-White begins with her informants' views of femininity and masculinity and then moves into perceptions of gender in the Gnostic Mass. "Phoebe" describes Babalon as a "goddess of life, love, desire and sex" but who may also be approached through other types of love relationships such as marital and parental.

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[181] Ibid., 19. The five lodges visited were Sekhet-Maat Lodge (Portland, Oregon); Star Sapphire Lodge (Los Angeles, California); 418 Lodge (Sacramento, California); Scarlet Woman Lodge (Austin, Texas); Alombrados Oasis (New Orleans, Louisiana). The other two lodges contacted were Blazing Star Oasis (in the Bay Area of California) and Golden Lotus Oasis (Los Angeles, California). An oasis forms from a camp and eventually becomes a lodge, based on membership and events. The informants were also all current or past lodge masters in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. The two bishops "Michael" and "Kevin" were in their 40s.

[182] Ibid., 22. Some of the sources are common to this paper, but many are not. Geographical location plays a significant role in the sources which influence research, especially at the master's level. We each follow our own path of discovery, influenced by the people we meet and the opportunities for experience presented. In order to accurately present my effort, I have not amended my sources to include hers. My thanks go to the nonlocal Thelemite who made Hedenborg-White's research known to me in mid-Fall 2013.

[183] Kowalchyk, "A Study of Two," 25. Quoted passages are Hedenborg-White's paraphrasing, except as noted.

However, she sees Nuit as more passive and "perhaps less overtly sexual than Babalon, but more representative of spiritual love."[184] On the other hand, "Adrian" thinks that Nuit's femininity may not necessarily be literal since she is "endless potential" and "cannot be limited to one gender."[185] He says that Babalon is "both creative and destructive power" and the manifestation of Nuit, but embodying many forms such as Kali.[186] An unnamed female interviewee suggested that Priestesses who were good at working with Babalon were good at surrendering and "allowing the current to flow through them."[187] Phoebe suggests that receptive energy might be intense, both mothering and protective, and "Michael" says that men and women channel both feminine and masculine energies.[188] Hedenborg-White notes that three informants describe spiritual androgyny as a "Thelemic ideal" while two others claim that the Gnostic Mass is "the interaction between divine principles [which] mirror[s] what takes place inside the individual."[189] Adrian, raised Roman Catholic, was "frustrated with the very limited roles available in Catholicism" but feels that Thelema and the Gnostic Mass "honor the feminine side of divinity."[190] Two female informants suggested that the Gnostic Mass may have therapeutic benefits because it demonstrates gender balance and

[184] Hedenborg-White, "To Him the Winged," 52-52.

[185] Ibid., 54.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Ibid., 55.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid., 56.

[190] Ibid., 57.

multiple layers of symbolism which require thought and engagement.[191] Hedenborg-White asserts that while some criticize the Gnostic Mass as androcentric or sexist, her informants dispute this.[192] "Sarah" claims that the Mass is a "symbolic enactment of the creation of new life – whether physical or metaphorical," and neither androcentric nor goddess worship.[193] Phoebe says that the Priest and Priestess together invoke Nuit, and that since the Priestess remains on the altar after the ritual and the Priest returns to the tomb, the ritual exalts the divine feminine.[194] Michael agrees and suggests that the Priest is "constantly reminded of his ordinariness and mortality in way that the Priestess is not."[195] A male informant claimed that Crowley's writings and rituals were about his own experiences and "do not explore women's mysteries explicitly."[196] When asked about the lack of women in the list of Saints, Adrian suggested it was an invocation of male energy by the Deacon, but "Christeos Pir" says it is a list of gnostics who have followed their True Wills.[197] When reminded that Hymenaeus Beta claims that it is a list of men who recognized the divine in women, Christeos Pir asked rhetorically, "So what's Nietzsche doing there?"[198]

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[191] Ibid.

[192] Ibid.

[193] Ibid., 58.

[194] Ibid.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Ibid.

[197] Ibid., 60.

[198] Ibid. Quoted in text.

Hedenborg-White observes that while gender-alternative performance of public Gnostic Masses are prohibited by the O.T.O but private gender-alternative rituals are permitted, there is no record available of private Masses.[199] Sarah is "open to" but "ambivalent" about changing gender roles in the Gnostic Mass since it is a symbolic performance of procreation but acknowledges that the fertility of the Priest and the Priestess may be at issue, if that is the case.[200] Adrian thinks that changing gender roles may be "worth exploring" but the higher degrees in the O.T.O. (which he does not have) may explain the stance of the O.T.O. leadership.[201] Two of her informants, one a homosexual man, argued that "creation of a magical child through the annihilation of opposites" is a "chemical procedure" and should not be altered.[202] According to Hedenborg-White, Michael has privately officiated as Priestess several times and says that in addition to being more understanding of other roles, this works because women and men have both energies; however, he accepts that in public Masses "the two physical genders generate specific intuitive assumptions and mental images, and that this makes the symbolism of the Mass clearer to all participants."[203] "Christina," a woman informant who has "played the role of the Priest three times," agrees with Michael and says that "kneeling at the feet of the goddess [is] an incredible honour" which "allow[s] her to see the goddess energy from the outside;" however, in order to clarify the symbolism of the

[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Ibid., 61.

[202] Ibid., 63. Note: Perhaps he said an "alchemical procedure"?

[203] Ibid., 61.

Gnostic Mass to the public, "stereotypical" roles are clearer.[204] Hedenborg-White reports that several of her informants claim that it is more common for women to take the Priest role than for men to take the Priestess role.[205] Phoebe suggests that two women together in sexualized roles may be more "normalized" and that "one's ability to channel feminine divine energy depends on one's willingness to surrender and that this may be more difficult for men who have been raised to fear a loss of control."[206] Michael points out that it may be easier for a woman to take the Priest role because "it is more attractive for subordinate groups to reach for positions that are considered to be connected to greater power."[207]

Hedenborg-White's informants also discussed gender, power and sexuality in the O.T.O. as part of her examination of the multiple systems of gender in the O.T.O. While my work here is focused on a single ritual of the O.T.O., the Gnostic Mass, the historical background and current atmosphere of the parent organization is relevant, so a brief overview of her data in this area may be useful. Two female informants told Hedenborg-White that they had experienced sexism and disrespect in the O.T.O. as a consequence of their gender but that these problems are gradually disappearing as the O.T.O. leadership has spoken against sexual harassment and men with the wrong attitude have left the order.[208] Hedenborg-White reports when Phoebe was younger, Mass visitors had

[204] Ibid. "Stereotypical" quoted in text.

[205] Ibid., 62.

[206] Ibid.

[207] Ibid.

[208] Ibid., 64, 66.

complained that she was "not young, thin or blonde enough" and that she left the order for a while because of a sexual assault.[209] Phoebe suggests that some of the sexism may have been generational or a result of the reputation of the O.T.O. as a "love cult."[210] Christeos Pir contends that Crowley's writings are sexist and that some prospective women members may be discouraged since the O.T.O. leaders have not publicly renounced any of Crowley's sexist statements.[211] However, Hedenborg-White emphasizes that none of her informants felt that sexism was inherent in Thelema itself and several said that Thelema has "great feminist potential" and is "an excellent growing ground for strong women."[212] Phoebe points out that women leaders have begun organizing women's conferences and publishing, and Hedenborg-White says that in her experience "many female O.T.O. members are more assertive and dominant than men in informal social situations."[213]

According to Hedenborg-White, sexuality and sexual orientation seem to be openly discussed and O.T.O. members readily recognize many expressions of relationship, including non-heterosexuality, polyamory and promiscuity.[214] Hedenborg-White cites a survey done by Vere Chappell of the O.T.O. members at the 2005 national conference using the Standard Sex Profile questionnaire created by the Institute for

[209] Ibid., 64.

[210] Ibid.

[211] Ibid., 65.

[212] Ibid., 67-68.

[213] Ibid., 64, 68.

[214] Ibid., 69.

Advanced Study of Human Sexuality. According to her, Chappell found that compared to American averages, O.T.O. members as a whole were "more experienced" and that, unlike the national trend, female O.T.O. members had more partners than the male members.[215] Like Kowalchyk's informants, Hedenborg-White's sources state that the Law of Thelema encourages acceptance of differences.[216] One of her informants, a transgender woman, stated that Thelema encouraged her to "find and develop herself."[217] Another informant reported that there is "a comparatively large number of transgender Thelemites, and that transgenderism and the desire and decision to go against norms and express what one feels is one's true identity can be seen as a very strong expression of the True Will."[218] This acceptance of non-heteronormal orientations and practices in the O.T.O. combined with heterosexual performativity in the Gnostic Mass contributes to the growing debate about the public performance of the Queer Gnostic Mass, the formula of the Mass, and the role of the feminine.

In her research, Hedenborg-White focuses on the "multiple gender systems inherent in contemporary O.T.O." through the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's work on gender binaries.[219] While Thelemic theology and the Gnostic Mass both express "gender essentialism in relation to the divine," the androgynous figures of Ra-Hoor-Khuit and Baphomet are symbols of "ambivalent gender" in the Gnostic Mass and may

[215] Ibid., 9, n4.

[216] Ibid., 69.

[217] Ibid., 70.

[218] Ibid.

[219] Ibid., 5.

represent a challenge to heterosexual binaries otherwise expressed in the Mass.[220] Hedenborg-White notes that changes in the order in regard to sexuality equality since the 1970s are associated with cultural change rather than criticism of Thelema, and her informants report the empowering and liberating effect of Thelema in their lives.[221] Despite the apparent sex and gender heteronormativity of Thelema and the Gnostic Mass, at the local level, sex and gender performance is more flexible.[222] She suggests that "the sacralisation of sexuality, polytheism and the emphasis on 'doing one's Will' [are] aspects of Thelema which may serve to counteract stereotypical gender roles."[223] Hedenborg-White concludes that multiple systems of gender performance in the O.T.O are revealed by using a "holistic" approach:

> A text-based study of Thelema would have not rendered any insight into the ways in which O.T.O. members challenge and transcend gender binary in informal social interaction, and remain open to a wide variety of sexual orientations and gender performances, possibly based on the idea of each person's True Will as sacred and right for them. Similarly, exclusive ritual studies would have given a skewed image of the performative creation of gender in the O.T.O. For instance, the gender binary that is performatively created in the Gnostic Mass does not give any clues as to the complex and ambiguous gender relations among the O.T.O. members.[224]

Participant Observation and Performance

In their fieldwork, Kowalchyk and Hedenborg-White both used a participant observation method which they acknowledge risks personal involvement and interview bias; however, since the Gnostic Mass is the central ritual of the O.T.O. (and of Thelema)

[220] Ibid., 73.

[221] Ibid., 78-79, 84.

[222] Ibid., 85.

[223] Ibid., 86.

[224] Ibid., 85.

and all visitors are required to take communion and announce "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods," it would be difficult to study the behavior or beliefs of E.G.C. members without at least this minimal level of engagement. Kowalchyk admits that her fieldwork was an "exploratory study" since she had only the "barest of hypotheses" but that the role of participant observer allowed her to understand the "nuances of responses" and "observe their beliefs in action."[225] She suggests that since "activities are as significant as beliefs," both interviews and observations are necessary.[226] Kowalchyk contends that three factors – time, circumstances and intimacy – dictate the accuracy of this type of fieldwork: The more time spent with a group, the more varied the encounters and the more familiar and accepted the researcher, the more candid and subtle a picture emerges.[227] She suggests that by spending approximately ten hours a week with the members for a year, she overcame some of the psychological distance inherent in recording interviews and observing as a nonmember: "Over time, the role of researcher was eclipsed by constant attendance and I came to be thought of as simply as a fellow member."[228] She emphasized, however, that permission was obtained from the group leaders first in order to prevent misunderstandings or abrupt exclusion.[229] Hedenborg-White was apparently more familiar with the practices and beliefs of the O.T.O. prior to fieldwork, since she had written an article on Babalon in 2011, but declared she was not a

[225] Kowalchyk, "A Study of Two," 9.

[226] Ibid., 10.

[227] Ibid., 11-12.

[228] It is not clear whether Kowalchyk took the entry-level Minerval degree (0º) of the O.T.O., but this and the offer to train as a Priestess is suggestive.

[229] Ibid., 11.

member of the O.T.O. or a Thelemite.[230] She described herself as "sympathetic towards certain elements of Thelema" and her participation as natural, necessary and respectful:

> For me, it was natural to join in and mimic the actions of the rest of the congregation to the best of my ability, as active participation in the ritual can provide a unique perspective that is not available to the passive observer. In fact, passive observation, or "sitting in the back, taking notes" as one of my informants described it, would likely have been disruptive to the officers and congregants. Furthermore, participation instantly demonstrates a certain level of respect and understanding for the phenomena studied, which likely helped show other participants that my intention was not to spy on, mock or in any way disrespect their spiritual practice.[231]

Both Kowalchyk and Hedenborg-White were concerned about anonymity for their informants, using aliases and choosing not to disclose the dates of interviews. Kowalchyk provided more extensive demographic detail such as ages, education, marital status and years in the group but did not often connect those data with the aliases.[232] Hedenborg-White was especially concerned about the identification of her informants since her itinerary of lodge visits was publicly known. Although Kowalchyk had an extensive list of questions which clearly indicated what information she was seeking, Hedenborg-White simply told her informants she was "interested in gender issues" but avoided discussing "theoretical perspectives or research questions" in order to not bias the informants.[233] One of the main difficulties with participant observation is the intrusiveness of recording methods; each researcher resolved this differently. Kowalchyk voice-recorded her interviews which resulted in greater accuracy and the preservation of

[230] Hedenborg-White, "To Him the Winged," 54.

[231] Ibid., 26.

[232] Kowalchyk, "A Study of Two," 443.

[233] Ibid., 438-442; Hedenborg-White, "To Him the Winged," 25.

original language and tone, but she balanced that with an increased participatory effort in order to engage sympathetically.[234] Hedenborg-White was not always able to voice record her interviews, but instead made extensive notes; however, although she was able to include informal in-person conversations in her fieldwork, her data are paraphrased.[235] While it is a challenge to produce reusable data from participatory fieldwork, using recording devices does make this easier but may create a boundary between the researcher and the interviewee. On the other hand, overuse of distance communication such as telephones and emails can create an unnatural sense of anonymity and security, resulting in disconnection and missed communication cues such as nods, shrugs, and facial expressions. In the present thesis, a combination of methods was used, because of the availability of the researcher and of the interviewees. Recorded interviews were conducted in person and by phone, with follow-up questions answered by emails. Informal conversations were not included as was required by group and institutional conditions; however, my personal response to participating in the Mass will be discussed in Chapter Four.

The methodology in my research has been influenced by two things: First, I have a strong personal interest in esotericism, gnosticism, and ritual as a method of mystical union; exploration and connection often orients my questions, rather than theory. Second, I believe that participant researchers in new religious movements – and particularly in neo-paganism – provide relevant and creative examples of method and interpretation. For example, Jone Salomonsen concludes in her article on the challenges of fieldwork in

[234] Kowalchyk, "A Study of Two," 12.

[235] Hedenborg-White, "To Him the Winged," 25.

modern magical communities that academic disciplines often have inadequate methodology for "modern mystery religions" because they lack the interdisciplinary approach necessary to measure and engage with them.[236] Further, acceptance and candor from the participants depends heavily on being perceived as sympathetic, invested and informed. Salomonsen says,

> As merely a sociologist or anthropologist I would never have been admitted to Reclaiming's [Feminist Witchcraft] inner circles. But as a theologian and feminist I was regarded as a religious being with a personally motivated interest in the subject of my study and, therefore, as possessing the necessary qualifications both to understand and to learn (about) Witchcraft.[237]

Melissa Harrington agrees and claims that psychology as a discipline could provide a greater depth of interpretation when it comes to feelings, insights or developmental changes over time.[238] As an example, she suggests that the feelings of recognition and homecoming perceived by Wiccans may be the result of the fulfillment of "long-held mental templates (schemas)" which is emotionally powerful exactly because it confirms and validates existing beliefs.[239]

While interdisciplinary familiarity and sympathetic interaction are essential in authentic research, it is also important to note that deeper engagement may lead to contaminated data for the researcher and to conceptual changes within the study group.

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[236] Jane Salomonsen, "Methods of Compassion or Pretension? The Challenges of Conducting Fieldwork in Modern Magical Communities," in *Researching Paganisms*, eds. Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy and Graham Harvey (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 54.

[237] Ibid.

[238] Melissa Harrington, "Psychology of Religion and the Study of Paganism," in *Researching Paganisms*, eds. Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy and Graham Harvey (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 80.

[239] Ibid.

Wendy Griffin points out that even survey questions are ultimately catalytic and may directly influence the future vocabulary, practice or worldview of the interviewees, especially in groups which are small, flexible or evolving.[240] She adds that the researcher is ever-present in their research, which in turn affects other researchers: "Who we are, where we have been, and how we go about our research all contribute to shaping both our understanding of the spiritual practice and the practice itself."[241] Andy Letcher calls this consequence of research "reactivity" and wonders if the term "Bard" used in his work on Eco-Paganism and adopted by many non-Druids has led to the fulfillment of a genre or the creation of a new identity from the research which attempted to examine it.[242] Letcher notes that just as in performance the audience is an agent (or active participant) affecting both the actor and the action, academic researchers are also always participants in that which they observe:

> To observe is to participate, to affect that which we see; and as there is no panoptical vantage point, no ultimate position of neutrality, we are all, insiders or not, involved in what we research. It is this final nail in the coffin of "scholarly objectivity" that is perhaps the [performance] approach's most significant contribution to the future of Pagan studies, and more widely, the academic project itself.[243]

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[240] Wendy Griffin, "The Deosil Dance," in *Researching Paganisms*, eds. Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy and Graham Harvey (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 66.

[241] Ibid.

[242] Andy Letcher, "Bardism and the Performance of Paganism: Implications for the Performance of Research," in *Researching Paganisms*, eds. Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy and Graham Harvey (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 33.

[243] Ibid., 35.

Moreover, he observes that as both a Pagan and an academic, he is able to apply academic method and terminology to his own experiences, but that the tension between the academic observer and the spiritual participant remains:

> In keeping with the times my spirituality remains impeccably elective, affectual, and syncretic; but where once I combined elements of Druidry, Wicca, Anglo-Saxon Heathenism, Bardism, and sixties psychedelia into my personal bricolage [art from pieces], I now include Aristotelean metaphysics, animism, performance, romanticism, Foucauldianism, phenology, and *flâneurisme*: terms, theories and concepts from academic discourse. Nevertheless, while I have used academic terminology herein to describe my own experiences (my search for "liminality" and so on), that part of me does not quite have the upper hand, for I regard the outcome of my personal drama to be, quite literally, in the lap of the Gods.[244]

The ethnographer D. Soyini Madison describes both ethnography and writing as the seed of experience which, when expressed or performed occupies time and space, and therefore public reality.[245] The expression of experience calls into being the audience, even if only a reader, a listener or an observer. She says that performance is a meeting between two worlds, the experience which is the source of expression and the experience which disturbs and inspires the audience.[246] The expression and the purpose of the performance are the same:

> Because performance asks the audience to travel empathically to the world of the subjects and to feel and know some of what they feel and know, two life-worlds meet and the domain of outsider and insider are simultaneously demarcated and fused … The performance ambitiously hopes to guide members of the audience and to equip them for the journey with empathy and intellect, passion and critique. There are creative tensions at the

[244] Ibid., 34.

[245] D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 152.

[246] Ibid., 176.

> borders between self and Other, yet the performance hopes to challenge them to become witness, interlocutor, subversor, and creator.[247]

Ethnography is also a performance of the relationship between the researcher's interests, the interviewees' interests, the requirements of the institution and the potential use by later researchers. How responses are elicited, selected, organized and introduced are part of the expression which grows from and within the experience.[248] Madison describes performative writing as relational, evocative, embodied and consequential.[249] She urges researchers to make their writing relational by making their writing an offering which makes a meaningful contribution to Others [*sic*], conveyed in terms that are balanced between the gracefully simple which is approachable and understandable and the beautifully complex, which "can be the most generous offering, because it demands growth, challenges the expected, and disturbs the complacent."[250] Performative writing is evocative when it "enacts as it describes," so that the reader can make a metaphorical leap from the bones to the being because they have been given enough information to evoke their imaginations and "render the absence present."[251] Madison states that writing is the performance of the researcher's voice, in which the body's experience of impressions is embodied through the writer's character and passion.[252] Finally, she says that performative writing is consequential and liberating; it breaks down old foundations

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[247] Ibid., 175-177.

[248] Ibid., 178.

[249] Ibid., 192.

[250] Ibid.

[251] Ibid., 194.

[252] Ibid., 196.

and rebuilds because "it embraces political struggle and is not ashamed of its politics and advocacy."[253]

In alignment with the view that ethnography is itself performative, my research project uses the method of participatory observation. The interviews were granted and performed with the understanding that I would be deeply engaged in the ideas presented in the Gnostic Mass. My original interest was to explore the ritual for possible Gnostic elements, but after observation of the Mass, it became clear that gender roles were significant in the performance of the Gnostic Mass as an act of transformation through union. Although Judith Butler will provide theoretical support for the analysis in Chapter Four, it appears that gender may be a more complicated topic when "energy" is discussed. While gender identity and sexual orientation is acknowledged as relevant by members to discussions of the Gnostic Mass, it is somewhat eclipsed by the need to preserve the liturgy and "what works" energetically. In light of this, other research and theory will also be used to illustrate patterns in the responses that speak of gendered energy in addition to gendered bodies. I have placed the research methodology details in Chapter Three with the interview responses in order to try to ensure that method and results stay linked. Although I will discuss it further in Chapter Four, I am aware that there is an inherent bias in data that are collected in one geographical location, especially since all the local members interviewed were trained by one couple. I have also been told by multiple people that there are several differences in ritual practice between the Florida lodges and the West Coast lodges. For this reason, I summarized the Hedenborg-White data which does not include Florida or the East Coast lodges but does include some West

[253] Ibid., 197.

Coast lodges plus New Orleans, Louisiana and Austin, Texas. It is likely that another researcher will need to do a national survey in order to more fully understand the larger picture, especially in regard to goddess worship practices in the Gnostic Mass, which are not emphasized in Florida.

Ethics in research is a serious challenge in magical communities since academic researchers may sometimes force theoretical interpretations on practices that do not inherently have parallels for the historically-weighted vocabulary which comes with theory. The O.T.O. especially seems to be suffering from research fatigue in which scholars have co-opted history, texts, and rituals for discussion while rarely consulting or quoting current members on practice or interpretation.[254] In addition, Western Esotericism as a demarcated area of academic study is only about two decades old and although many of these scholars work closely together and are well-known within their rarified field, they are not necessarily visible to the larger academic community. As an example: In 2013, I was amazed to discover how few scholarly reviews had been done for Hugh Urban's influential book *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (2006) despite the fact that it is a university publication. While this profound silence may indicate that sex magic is a career breaker or even that hardcovers simply cost too much in an era of funding cutbacks, it may also suggest that unless work is accepted by the academic profession *before* review, it will not be reviewed at all and may remain invisible in modern theory development. Somewhat ironically,

[254] This comment has been made repeatedly to me by nonlocal Thelemites during the course of my research. However, it should be noted that some scholars and academics who write about Crowley or his works appear to be currently or previously affliated to the O.T.O. or other related orders such as the A.A., the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or Gardnarian Wicca.

Peter Dubé, an independent scholar and writer, while praising Urban's book for preserving "at-risk information" and clearing the foundations of false histories, also points out that "in light of the intellectual near-hegemony wielded by universities, the account of a particular subject contained in scholarly publications tends to become the 'official' version, shutting out competing narratives" and that "such hegemonic accounts can threaten magic(k) as a cultural force."[255] While my thesis is not likely to threaten any cultural forces, I have tried to be aware of and resist the tendency to make experience fit theory, preferring to express the spirit of inquiry rather than the letter of analysis.

[255] Peter Dubé, "Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism, Hugh B. Urban," *Ashé Journal: The Journal of Experimental Spirituality* 10, no. 1 [2013], http://ashejournal.com/index.php?id=346, n.p.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH

> The key of the rituals is in the secret word which I have given unto him.
> Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law*

Although there have been some studies which have touched on the experience of women and the role of the feminine in the O.T.O., few have focused intensively on these aspects in a single local group and, specifically, in regard to the experience of the Priestess and the Priest in the Gnostic Mass of the E.G.C. While it is impossible to fully address the gender culture of a single ritual which is informed by the founder's personality, the historical development of the ritual and the current principles of the parent organization, it is useful to examine how gender roles are perceived in a close-knit community which has been performing this ritual faithfully every month for at least nine years. In this section, I will present selections from the interviews of six paired members, three Priestesses and three Priests, plus some additional insights from a non-local Priestess. In the interests of privacy, each of those interviewed for this project have been identified by simplified coded initials which allow the reader to retain a sense of relationship among the Mass pairs. Although this coding obscures the interviewee identity to the non-member public, it is possible that insiders will be able to determine the identity of the participants, especially since all but one come from a single lodge. Since all of the participants were willing to use legal or ritual names as identification, these aliases are merely intended to protect them from being publicly quoted outside the realm of respectful scholarship and to fulfill research requirements for privacy. Dates of the interviews have been included since they do not noticeably increase identification but

may help illustrate my changing perspective and interests over time. Although I made available some guiding questions to the interviewees beforehand, the interviewees were encouraged to respond outside of those parameters and I placed an emphasis on their personal experience and interpretation, rather than responses suggested by texts or doctrine. Since they knew me to be a student of esotericism, the interviewees frequently volunteered additional explanation and insights to bridge my knowledge of related concepts so that I would reach a fuller understanding.

Ritual Space, Mass Teams and Congregants

This research developed originally from a class project in religious ethnography which required the observation of an unfamiliar ritual and interviews of participants, analyzed from the perspective of a prominent ritual theorist. Theory provided a framework for the participants' answers which then either supported or refuted the theory of behavior. I was aware of the Gnostic Mass, and of this group particularly, through related reading and through my long-term involvement in the local community as a past owner of a metaphysical bookstore. A friend introduced me to a local E.G.C. bishop who agreed to assist with the class project and, later, with the thesis research. This bishop and his wife, also a bishop, introduced me to potential interviewees and also provided extensive background information. For the class project, I observed the Gnostic Mass twice and interviewed the Priestess and the Priest who performed both Masses.[1] For the thesis, I observed the Mass seven more times, participated in a training session in the role of a Child, and interviewed three Priestess and Priest pairs, plus an additional Priestess

[1] It should be noted that observation of the mass is inherently participatory since all visitors are congregants and must take communion and proclaim aloud "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods."

(also a bishop) who was not a member of the local lodge. Although the Priestess and Priest pair originally observed had been interviewed for the class project, for the sake of consistency and to fulfill research requirements they were re-interviewed for the thesis. Interviews were conducted in person or on the phone, and were recorded and transcribed. All but one interviewee were interviewed separately for an hour to an hour and a half, and the local bishops were also interviewed together in person in a preliminary information session which helped to provide insight and focus. All the interviewees were contacted by email with follow-up questions. The eight thesis interviews plus the follow-up emails were conducted from November 2013 through September 2014; the nine Mass observations (plus the training session) were made from January 2013 to October 2014.

The Mass was observed in two locations during that time, with the first two Masses in the first location and the other seven in the second location. Both of these locations were dedicated lodge spaces with public access and parking, specially-constructed lodge furnishings and an antechamber with a library and comfortable seating. Although there were some minor differences in performance due to space considerations such as the height of the ceiling, the addition of sconce wall lighting, and the replacement over time of the original steps, pillars and small altars with more finely-crafted steps, pillars and small altars, the layout and the ritual itself remained consistent in both locations. In both cases, the congregants waited outside until the Mass team was ready and reconvened outside after the Mass. Despite the curious glances of other people in the vicinity, the congregants seemed comfortable and enjoyed conversation with each other while waiting. Although I had agreed to restrict my interviews to experienced Mass team members, many other members seemed aware of my project and were generally

encouraging. At all of the Masses, there were several congregants who were not local members but were either interested seekers, friends, family or non-local visiting members. For the visitors, the Deacon acted as a guide and explained before the Mass what they could expect, some of the basic responses and also the requirement that all visitors must participate in the communion. Although I was told several times that some people may have strong emotional responses such as fainting, the visitors I observed were calm, hesitating only briefly at some of the unfamiliar responses. In all but the first Mass, the Mass team included a Priestess, a Priest, a Deacon and two Children but the number of congregants attending varied from seven (once), ten to fifteen (four times), and fifteen to twenty-five (four times). Higher turnout seemed to correlate with Masses performed by bishops or visiting officers, although there may have been other factors since some of the visiting congregants arrived in groups.

Although the observed Mass teams varied somewhat according to availability and training requirements, each Priestess and Priest pair seemed to frequently work with a particular Deacon. As several interviewees noted, although the Mass team also includes the Children, the Deacon is of primary importance to the performance of the Priestess and the Priest. The Deacon acts as the representative and filter for the congregation, providing ritual assistance, and may be the only person the Priestess or the Priest looks directly at during the Mass other than each other. In this lodge during this period, the Deacon (D3) was a newer officer and as such was not available for interviews; however, one experienced Priest (LPt) acted as Deacon (D2) several times while his Priestess was unavailable to perform Mass. Another Deacon (D1) acted as a Child paired with his spouse once she became more active as a new member, suggesting that working as a

Child pair is as valued an experience as being Deacon. In nine Mass observations, I saw no female Deacons but the negative Child role was always held by either the new female member or by a Priestess (LPs) not currently active in the Priestess role. Although three of the four Priestesses said they had never been a Deacon, two of those three said that they planned to train as Deacon in the next year.

This lodge stresses the value of a committed Priestess and Priest pair; however, they might be a Mass performance partnership rather than a romantic couple. In one Mass observed, a local Priestess (BPs) performed Mass with a visiting Priest (VPt1), but the two married pairs confirmed that they had never or no longer performed Mass with anyone other than their spouses. According to the nonlocal bishop (NLPs), this is a characteristic more strongly found in Florida, whereas in other areas married or romantically-committed Priestesses and Priests work in different pairings more often.[2] One observed Mass pair (NPs and NPt) were unavailable for interviews because they were a relatively newly-formed pair, while one pair (LPs and LPt) interviewed did not perform the Mass as Priestess and Priest during this period but did perform as Child and Deacon, respectively. Another observed Mass pair (VPs2 and VPt2) were married but since they were visitors and outside the parameters of my institutional research approval,

[2] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014. According to the performance guide *To Perfect This Feast*: "In our experience, working with a consistent Mass team has been most effective, although personnel shifts are quite common in the O.T.O. We find a stable Mass team tends to build communication between the officers. We are able to start from the plateau we reached in the previous performance so we are not reinventing the wheel each time we do a Mass. We progress as a magical unit as we get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses, preferences and dislikes, and areas where each of us needs the other's guidance. We know other members of the clergy who prefer varying team members for maximum inclusion. The idea is to experiment and find what works best for you." James Wasserman and Nancy Wasserman, *To Perfect this Feast: A Performance Commentary on the Gnostic Mass*, revised 3rd ed. (n.l: Sekmet Books, 2013), 21.

they were not interviewed. Of the experienced Priestess and Priest pairs locally available, all three were interviewed.

Chart 1: Mass Teams Observed and/or Interviewed

Priestess	Priest	Deacon	Observed?	Interviewed?
BPs	BPt	D1(2x); D3(1x)	3x	Yes, both
EPs	EPt	D2 (=LPt)	3x	Yes, both
LPs	LPt	--	n/a	Yes, both
NPs	NPt	D3	1x	n/a
BPs	VisitPt1	D3	1x	BPs, yes; VPt1, no
VisitPs2	VisitPt2	D3	1x	n/a
NonLocalPs	--	--	n/a	NLPs, yes

The Priestesses and Priests interviewed were first asked about their length of service as Priestess or Priest, their training, and their current or previous Mass partners. The first Priestess I interviewed (BPs) had been a Priestess for five years, during which she worked with two Priests; the first (NPt) for about two and a half years, and the current one (BPt) for another two and a half years.[3] She estimates that she has performed Mass approximately thirty-five times during the total five-year period, once monthly for the first two years, then more occasionally after that. Her first Mass partner was a romantic partner; her second Mass partner is a close friend. She and her first partner practiced by themselves for six months before the first Mass, using the performance

[3] Note, however, that during the course of this research, BPs performed the Mass with a visiting Priest.

guide *To Perfect This Feast* and then performing for the first time privately with a small group which included the local bishops.[4] Her current Priest (BPt) has been performing the Mass as a Priest for nine years and has performed Mass as Priest about ninety to one hundred times. He has also had two Mass partners; his first Priestess was a romantic partner. He worked with her for approximately seven years. BPs and BPt are the lodge master and the secretary, respectively, and responsible for coordinating lodge activities including the public Gnostic Mass.

The other two local Mass pairs are married to their Mass partner, as is the nonlocal Priestess. One married pair, LPs and LPt, have performed the Mass as Priestess and Priest for eight years and have only performed with each other. They have performed Mass between fifty and seventy-five times. A second married pair, EPs and EPt, have performed the Mass exclusively together for twenty-five years, although each performed Mass before that with other people. They have each officiated as Priestess or Priest over one hundred times, and in addition, both are bishops and have trained or mentored all of the local officers interviewed. The nonlocal Priestess (NLPs) is also a bishop and as is her husband (not interviewed). She has been performing Mass for twenty-nine years and has performed as Priestess approximately one hundred and fifty times. Although she primarily officiates with her husband, she has occasionally worked with other Priests for training purposes or for special events. The three bishops interviewed all stated that they have frequently trained or mentored new Mass officers and new bishops.[5] They have published books, articles and videos about Mass performance, performed at national

[4] James Wasserman and Nancy Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast: A Performance Commentary on the Gnostic Mass*, revised 3rd ed. (n.l: Sekmet Books, 2013).

[5] The bishops have no special role in the Gnostic Mass liturgy.

gatherings, and traveled to other lodges to provide training. Each noted that a bishop, regardless of gender, can train and mentor either a Priest or Priestess as needed, and that they have trained both Priests and Priestesses.

Chart 2: Length of Service, Number of Mass Partners, Age and Marital Status

Code	Office	Length	# Mass Partners	Approx. Times	Age	Married?
BPs	Priestess	5 years	2 [+1][6]	35	30s	Single
BPt	Priest	9 years	2	90-100	40s	Single
LPs	Priestess	8 years	1	50-75	30s	Married
LPt	Priest	8 years	1	50-75	30s	Married
EPs	Priestess/Bishop	28 years	2	hundreds	50s	Married
EPt	Priest/Bishop	+28 years	1 + Infrequent	hundreds	60s	Married
NLPs	Priestess/Bishop	29 years	1 + Occasional	150	n/a	Married

Experiencing the Gnostic Mass for the First Time

Since the Gnostic Mass is the primary celebration of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (E.G.C.), the church of Thelema, the interviewees were asked about their previous religious background, how they came to see their first Gnostic Mass and what inspired them to become a Priestess or Priest. Each response was unique and seemed to have in common only a general openness to ritual practice as a method to explore and enhance individual spirituality. In general, however, the Priestesses and Priests do not

[6] This Priestess worked with a Visiting Priest during my observational period but after my original interview, but stated by email that this was the first time she had worked with anyone other than her first and second partner. BPs, email follow up, 11/7/2014.

necessarily treat membership in the parent order (O.T.O.) as a separate experience from becoming officers for the Gnostic Mass in the E.G.C. Their stories about first seeing the Mass are often simultaneous with joining the O.T.O. and, furthermore, they are only able to become Priestess or Priest after receiving certain degrees in the O.T.O. which makes O.T.O. membership a requirement for public Gnostic Mass performance. Another characteristic for all seven was the rapidness of movement from seeing the Gnostic Mass to becoming a Priestess or Priest, usually within a year or two, which appears to be due to the availability of a Mass partner and their ability to train as a pair. Interestingly, none of the local Priestesses were Deacons before becoming a Priestess which might possibly also indicate the tendency for partnered women members to train quickly as a Priestess or a paired Child.

Two of the interviewees, BPs and BPt, had nonreligious backgrounds. Priestess BPs grew up with no religious or spiritual training but was given a copy of *The Book of the Law* by a friend (later, her second partner) during the passing of a family member. Although she personally knew several local O.T.O. members, she did not join the O.T.O. or see a Gnostic Mass until she had moved to another state. When she did see the Mass for the first time as a new O.T.O. member, she felt "tingly and visceral," which she described as a religious reaction.[7] She stressed that she did not seek to do the Mass at that time, but after seeing it five times she was asked by the man who became her first Priest if she would like to perform it. She described her agreement as "a weird moment":

> I had never thought about doing it, actually. I didn't necessarily want to do it. It wasn't really comfortable for me, so I wasn't looking for anyone or even trying to do it … When I retell that story, it's almost like I go to look

[7] BPs, recorded interview in person B01, January 30, 2014.

> behind me. Like, who the hell said that? That's so out of character for me, and I don't know. I might have been caught up in the moment … I don't know what it was. It was like, I feel like it was not me. It was a detached version of me or something, I don't know.[8]

Her current Priest, BPt, describes himself as raised agnostic but long attracted to the occult. He first saw the Gnostic Mass with his first partner as a nonmember immediately prior to O.T.O. initiation. He described himself as "floored, I couldn't believe what was going on," it was so incredibly powerful. It "shed the boundary issues and insecurities that people usually deal with regarding nudity and whatever kind of taboos" and he saw that the Priestess was "tapping into something bigger than she was."[9] During his first training session to be a Priest, he was overwhelmed:

> Even though I was just in a living room[10] and I didn't have, let's say all the best bells and whistles, like the full regalia of the temple setting and the candles and the incense … What I was doing and what I was saying resonated with me in such a deep way that I didn't understand what was going on, I just started crying … You know, I don't believe in reincarnation or any of that stuff. I really don't believe in anything. But if I had to explain it, it probably felt like there was hundreds of years' worth of searching, that I finally, finally found … There was something that was beyond me that was happening, that extended much farther than my mortality, that I had connected with … It felt like I finally found something that struck my core.[11]

The second pair, LPs and LPt, had a different reaction to seeing their first Gnostic Mass. The Priest LPt describes himself as having a "really cool Catholic upbringing" in which his parents were "super supportive" and he was encouraged to "take the things that

[8] Ibid.

[9] BPt, recorded interview by phone E02, August 2, 2014.

[10] When this group was founded, it met at first in a private home.

[11] Ibid.

make sense to you; the things that don't make sense, let them simmer."[12] He joined the O.T.O before reading *The Book of the Law*, and saw the Gnostic Mass for the first time the same week after his initiation. His first reaction was that the Mass was "contrived-looking" and he didn't have an "affinity intellectually or artistically for the Mass." However, he stated that:

> I'm a martial arts teacher. I'm really into physical stuff and I felt that there was something to it, a physical energy. There was something very real about it to me … I was intrigued by the concept of a ritual, a spiritual ritual, that was based these ideas of about spiritual freedom and power for all, for everybody, that kind of stuff. Gnosis in general. I come from a Catholic background so I was familiar with weird: People dressed weird, saying weird words. That was not a shock to me but nothing about it actually was a shock. But I thought it was just really cool, you know, in the sense that they were male and female working together.[13]

His Priestess, LPs, is from a New Age family who were involved in the Maharishi transcendental meditation movement, but because she was taught God was both everywhere and nowhere, she had yearned for a more "tangible relationship with God," begging her parents as a child to take her to church.[14] When she learned about her fiancé's interest in the Gnostic Mass, she was excited because she had seen a Catholic Mass on television and thought it would be like that:

> So I went and it's like this very somber, sort of intense … A lot of words I didn't understand [and] people dressed in funny clothes. I mean, to me it looked like a bad play. I was very aware of how awkward it was. You see, there was no church. We were in someone's living room. But then, being raised the way I was and meditating as a little kid, I couldn't deny there was a physical change, an energy that I felt. I felt like the top of my head was tingling and I was very relaxed. And I enjoyed it, enjoyed myself even though I was uncomfortable with how awkward it was. So that was

[12] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014.

[13] Ibid.

[14] LPs, recorded interview by phone E01, February 27, 2014.

> my first impression. And then when [EPt] approached me [and said] Okay, you're doing the Mass because we have no girls, I was, like: Oh, okay, maybe I would like to explore this a little further … I was just curious.[15]

Both LPs and LPt occasionally attend Catholic Mass in addition to the Gnostic Mass. According to LPt, because of his upbringing and the acceptance of his parents and friends, he doesn't feel like there is a contradiction. However, his wife LPs says that although there are "things in the Catholic Church that fulfill things that I desire that O.T.O. doesn't … the things you have to agree to become a Catholic, I don't believe … But I still go … We do the whole Catholic Easter thing because I love it."[16] She joined the O.T.O. after seeing the Gnostic Mass and after beginning Priestess training.

The three bishops have been performing the Mass for over twenty-five years each, but they describe their first experience with the Mass as beautiful or resonating. EPs was raised Southern Baptist in Florida but started looking into unconventional spirituality in her teens, considering several traditions, including Santeria. When she moved to New York, she discovered that her landlady not only was a member of the O.T.O. but had a temple set up in the parlor of her Victorian home. She was invited to the Mass and joined the O.T.O. within two months. Describing the first time she saw the Gnostic Mass, she says, "I thought it was really beautiful and I really liked the fact that there was a woman officiating. And actually, I think there was a female Deacon, too. I'm not really sure now, but I really liked that."[17] She initially trained as a Priestess with her first partner but she was not very active as a Priestess until her second Priest, EPt, who retrained her:

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] EPs, recorded interview by phone A02, February 8, 2014.

> I wanted to learn and [I worked with] mostly one person, the guy I was seeing at the time. And part of the reason I didn't do it as much as I wanted to because he was pretty uncomfortable. I didn't feel uncomfortable at all but he was not that keen on it. Because it is a Tantric ritual, he wasn't comfortable with me doing the Mass with other people.[18]

Her current Priest, EPt, was raised in a Jewish household that he described as "not kosher or overly observant" but his parents were active in building the local Temple and he was the first to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah there. Although appreciative of some aspects of Judaism, he is fully committed to Thelema:

> I was very isolated as a Jew, the only one in my school until my brother came in two years later. I often thought I wanted to be Christian so I could fit in better but the doctrine of Jesus as "messiah" struck me (and still strikes me) as insane. I pretty much stopped attending after my Bar Mitzvah. When my father died in 2000, I did go to a Temple for a while, a Chabad group, to try to pay my respects to him and my Jewish roots. I found they were super sophisticated about grief, a very mature tradition which I hope to incorporate into O.T.O. work. I truly appreciated their help and friendship. But I found the same tedious Old Aeon stuff I remembered from childhood and gave it a rest after a couple of visits.[19]

The third bishop, NLPs, was raised a Christian Scientist, but had been interested in esotericism since her childhood. She and her mother studied tarot, astrology, and I Ching, and read Carlos Castaneda's *Journey to Ixtan* together. In high school, she left Christian Science after a spiritual experience in the desert. After meeting her husband (now also a bishop) in college, they eventually attended a Mass seminar together. She explains:

> One night in Death Valley I was admiring the winter sky. I don't know if you've ever spent the night in the desert, but the stars are piercingly bright. I can't describe exactly what happened, but its beauty brought me to tears. I had been meditating on some basic Christian Science tenets--namely that true beauty doesn't lie in the material world, only in the spiritual. I found

[18] Ibid.

[19] EPt, email follow-up, October 14, 2014.

> that I couldn't deny what my senses told me was beautiful, maybe because I was so young … When I dropped Christian Science, I figured I should find a group of like-minded people to study with. At the time, I imagined it would be a coven, but the covens in the area where I went to college were all busy bickering with one another, definitely not what I was interested in. I met my husband and he introduced me to Crowley's writings. We discussed joining O.T.O., but at the time it didn't work out. We ended up finally attending a Mass seminar in Los Angeles shortly after Hymenaeus Beta took over, and we liked it a lot. I remember my first reaction to Mass was that I wanted to become a Priestess.[20]

The Priestess' Role in the Gnostic Mass

When asked about the role of the Priestess in the Gnostic Mass, all of the interviewees referred to her role in relation to the other officers, particularly as support for the Priest. In addition, they were all careful to note that the perception of the Priestess' role was personal and often difficult to describe. Since the "role of the Priestess" could be interpreted either from the perspective of ritual functionality or spiritual purpose, the answers varied quite a bit. One Priestess, BPs, suggests that for her the Priestess' role is one of directing and consolidating:

> Well, for me, she [the Priestess] *is* the Mass. I feel like I need to be a lot more in control on the Mass days … I try to bring everybody's energy to the same level … I take on the responsibility of bringing the five people of the ritual's energy together. So I feel like the Priestess, from before it starts, sets the energy … It's something that needs to be done: Everyone has to be operating at the same level. With my team that's what I'm used to. That's how we move, we move as a unit … For me, it starts from the beginning, like the role starts, even way before it starts, by making sure that everyone's on the same page, but they have to on, like, my page … The ritual's written in such a way that the Priestess enters the temple as the Priestess and is elevated to the status of a goddess. The Priest enters as a man, who is elevated to a Priest. She is a level above him, so to speak, from the get-go. And I think that is where my in-charge-of-the-situation comes from, it's almost like I have to get in that head space … [21]

[20] NLPs, email follow-up, August 10, 2014.

[21] BPs, recorded interview in person B01, January 30, 2014.

Her Mass partner, BPt, responded to a question about what makes a good Priestess with an answer that indicates the importance of a Priestess who is a proficient ritual partner in the successful performance of the Mass:

> I think what makes a good Priestess is definitely her intent, her will. Which also means how focused she is. How serious she is about learning the ritual and performing it properly. How good she is at settling into her role and delivering her energy in her lines in a way that really projects and carries across to the congregation where people can really feed on that kind of energy. How attuned she would be to my movements; how attentive she would be to where I'm at in the ritual and then anticipating what's coming next. So that way, once I move on to the next section she's already in motion to where I can … It's more of a fluid movement as opposed to me having to stop to wait for something or to think if we are somewhere next. Sometimes the way a Priestess moves, actually gives me the signal to what's happening next, because sometimes I'll get lost … And so, she'll, for instance, raise up the cup or the paten to say this is next, and I kind of feed on that. Definitely, what's going to make a good Priestess is unquestionably a rehearsed Priestess … with the Mass team and even with her own role, so she knows where she is and where she needs to be next[22].

The second Mass pair, LPs and LPt, addressed how the spiritual energy that a Priestess brings to the Mass can be present simultaneously as the Priestess is also functioning practically. LPs noted that there is a high level of nonverbal communication required to bring forth the energy of the Mass, but that the Priestess and the Priest each have their areas of responsibility:

> The Priestess is a kind of channel for the divine energy, by the nature of women being receptive and things like that. For me, personally, I feel like the Priestess brings a calm, grounding, filtering energy, if that makes any sense. The Deacon is sort of the circus ring master; he's the one that if there's drama, the Deacon handles it. The Priest, he's the raw force, he's the one that totally loses himself and accepts whatever energy is there, but to me, the Priestess is the one who ordains the Priest. She's the one who

[22] BPt, recorded interview by phone E02, August 2, 2014.

> sets the tone, I guess, of the temple. She maintains the energy. She supports the Priest but she also introduces him to God, in a sense.[23]

When asked how a Priestess can communicate nonverbally with the Priest while also channeling, maintaining or projecting energy, LPt suggested that being a magician was like being a juggler – at first it is difficult to keep everything in the air, but eventually you settle into a flow in which the physical movements move to the background.[24] He explained:

> The job of the conscious mind, or the mundane consciousness as you put it, is to make the ritual go well. She's up there making sure I don't trip and that I know where the cup is, all that kind of stuff, and I'm up there making sure I don't spear her in the head and hit the congregant who's to the right of me with the butt of the lance. But that's at one level, at a whole other level, simultaneously and without conscious effort, in my experience, there's another thing happening and the best way I could describe it is the communion of, like a spiritual communion …You know, we're trained, we're professionals. We know what we're doing. I could sit there and have the highest level ecstasy, gnosis, and still remember not to trip over my robe. That's cool. They're not contradictory.[25]

The third Mass pair, EPs and EPt, addressed the perception that some might have that the role of the Priestess is passive or supporting while the role of the Priest was active or leading. In both cases, they stressed that interpretation of meaning should be left to the individual and that energy movement or perception was due to the mechanics of the Mass, rather than the efforts of the officers to create a particular experience. EPs described it like this:

> I think the Priestess – we're getting into theoreticals now – but what I feel, my opinion is that the Priestess channels divine energy and passes it

[23] LPs, recorded interview by phone E01, February 27, 2014.

[24] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014.

[25] Ibid.

> through the Priest into the congregation. I don't think the Priest could function without that. The Priestess has to make herself open and available to receive that energy. You kind of have to go in there without any expectations of what will or will not happen. You just have to let it happen. In that sense, it seems passive but it's actually quite active because you're sort of the receptacle for that energy … You've got to be open to receive but you can't be open to everything … It's just *that* energy that you direct through the Priest to the congregation … The Priestess is an officiant at a religious ceremony, a spiritual, magical ceremony. And you know, I may be the Priestess this week [but] next week it's BPs, maybe LPs will be next … It's not like it's not the Priestess [acting, but] it's not the energy of the Priestess, it's the energy of the Mass.[26]

When asked where the energy to raise and consecrate the Priest comes from, EPs said that the Priestess may also have magical training and personal practices which prepare her before she even walks into the temple:

> Before I was a Priestess, I was a magician, and I understand how to channel and raise energy. Part of … and I think it's part of the feminine nature … I've sort of incorporated the divine into my nature. A lot of energy I gather during the first part of the Mass with the walk, but a lot of what I gather, or what I think gives me the energy I'm using to bestow priesthood upon the Priest is work that I've done prior to walking through the temple … I spend the day or maybe the weekend meditating on the Mass, meditating and getting myself ready, praying, doing all that stuff to get ready to participate in the Mass.[27]

The Priest EPt explained that while both Priestess and Priest are magicians and trained to actively work with energies, each has a different facet of the divine energy to work with in the Gnostic Mass. Both the Priestess and the Priest bring through energy in a way that might be described as channeling but results in a radical change of consciousness.[28]

[26] EPs, recorded interview by phone A02, February 8, 2014.

[27] Ibid.

[28] EPt, recorded interview in-person A01, November 2, 2013.

While the divine energy is ultimately singular, it can be perceived and described only as facets. EPt explains how this is conscious embodiment of energy:

> It's controlled possession, it's magical possession. The difference between the possession of spiritualism and the possession of magic is that magic is a willed possession and involves consciousness of the being, of one's self … The O.T.O. is supposed to be a collection of magicians, balls to the wall, 100% active magicians who are doing [magic] twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. So if they are, they will be able to work with the energies of the Mass, but the Mass is energy and you need to maintain the condition of spiritual, physical, and mental purity to be able to do a proper Mass … I'm just invoking the energy. I just want to get myself worked up to a level of enough enthusiasm and enough depersonalization that I can bring through what is my part to bring through … But in terms of the energy that EPs and I bring through, I don't think it's the same. She's not experiencing the same thing as I am, but we are experiencing the One Thing that has multiplicity of facets.[29]

When discussing one of the key transition points in the Mass where the Priestess opens the tomb, releases the Priest and consecrates him, NLPs describes the role of Priestess as varying from point to point but one of her functions is making it possible for the Priest to fulfill his own higher role.[30] She was asked what authority the Priestess has to raise him from man to Priest, or in other words, what she contributes to that process:

> She's been through a few things herself. The first thing she does is she comes into the temple is to exalt the source of the life-giving force within her and place it before deity. So in that sense, she's given up, she dedicated the source of her power to this cause. When she brings the Priest out of the tomb, she says, declares the purpose of the Mass, "That thou mayst administer the virtues to the brethren," and that kind of defines the course of everything that follows. All is being done so this may happen and because of that she has the power to do what she's declared is about to be done ...
>
> When she calls the Priest out of the tomb, it is for him a birth, right? She doesn't have that moment, she's brought in as a full-fledged virgin, as a

[29] Ibid.

[30] NLPs, email follow-up, August 10, 2014.

> full-fledged sexually mature adult, that phase of her life. So in that sense, she's being like a mother to him. From an internal point of view, I most certainly don't feel like the Priest's mother when I bring him out of the tomb. He's my future consort. This is an act of supreme love, bringing him forth, in a way that you don't quite look at your own child. So it's a little bit different from her perspective as from his.
>
> When he comes out of the tomb, he's being called out by a being with the power to invoke him, and in that sense whatever she does and says, he will look at with, that she has the authority to do so. But from my perspective, it's what I'm made for. It's the whole purpose of my being, so yes, the power is there. It's who I am at that point in the Mass, the Virgin … He goes to death, from birth to death during the course of it. She goes from adulthood to dissolution and ecstasy; it's not a life story for her … His is a point event in a life of a person, or hopefully a series of point events in the life of a person. For her, in the course of the ritual, she's not portraying the life of a person. But she is simply in this state of gnosis and she has to achieve that before he is brought up into it.[31]

What Energy Does the Priestess Experience?

In the Gnostic Mass, the Priestess proclaims, "Greeting of Heaven and Earth!" The Priestess raises the Priest and is escorted as Virgin by the Priest to the altar. There the Priest invokes Nuit, Queen of Space and continuous one of Heaven. From behind the veil, the Priestess calls to him using the words of Nuit as given in *The Book of the Law*. When the veil is drawn back, the Priestess appears, not as herself, but as Mystery of Mystery, invoked by the Priest as "One, our Lord in the Universe the Sun, our Lord in ourselves" who appears upon the throne.[32] In the Creed, there are three named Mystery of Mystery – Chaos, Babalon, and Baphomet – but only Babalon is called Earth, Mother and Her.[33] In the Collects, the Lady is the gate of life and love and who, along with her

[31] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014.

[32] *Liber XV*: "IV: On the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil."

[33] *Liber XV*: "III: Of the Ceremony of the Introit."

handmaiden, is ever ready in her office of gladness but is neither the Moon nor the Earth. This thread of names and attributes cannot be unraveled easily.[34] What energy does the Priestess experience and what name, if any, does she give it?

While all four Priestesses interviewed were reluctant to state absolutely what energy is represented by the Priestess as indicated by either the liturgy or *The Book of the Law*, they all had clear ideas about what they personally experienced as a Priestess on the altar. Two Priestesses rejected the idea that they represented a specific god or goddess, but did state that they felt feminine in their role as Priestess. When asked what gods or goddesses she might identify with while seated on the altar, BPs stated that it could be any or all of them:

> It kind of becomes arbitrary. I think Nuit is the correct answer but she's so much all of them, too. They're kind of the same in a way. I wasn't raised religious so for me that isn't a weird thing … I have never had to pick a right one, I guess. For me, religion is like those archetypes. When I sit like this [the altar pose], it's like a little more feminine because it's really hard to sit like this, with the arms [up]. So I try to go to a bit of a feminine place that's maybe a little more Venusian. But then again, it's like an energy, not a goddess … I don't really care what the name is. It's the epitome of femininity for me.[35]

LPs also experiences the role of Priestess as feminine but describes her experience on the altar as a sharing of the divine with the Priest. She points out that manipulating and protecting the elements on the altar is very different from dealing with the elements on the floor; the elements on the altar are in a much higher state, like cosmic forces.[36]

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[34] *Liber XV*: "V: Of the Office of the Collects Which Are Eleven in Number."

[35] BPs, recorded interview in person B01, January 30, 2014.

[36] LPs, recorded interview by phone E01, February 27, 2014.

Although she does not identify with a particular god or goddess but with the divine as a more general term, she feels feminine in her role as Priestess:

> But when the veil closes, I feel very sure, like it's just me and God. It's a very powerful feeling, very personal, intense. The energy feels much more intense. Now I have removed all the sensory things going on the outside and I can just focus on the words I'm saying, which is a call of the God, and then sort of a call for the Priest, too … I feel very feminine at that point … But when you're on the altar, the veil is closed, [the Priestess should be] receptive to the energy and giving. The Priestess is not weak by any means: She has a sword and can kick ass. But, you can still be open and receptive and feminine and graceful and still be strong and powerful and kick ass and commanding. [After the veil opens,] I definitely look at the Priest [during] some of the lines because I feel like we're kind of saying the lines together … because at that point, for him, I am a representation of the divine. To look in the eyes of God, not that I'm God, but there's a connection that happens. Looking into each other's eyes I think helps the energy.[37]

The other two Priestesses were willing to name a goddess for the sake of convenience but both suggested that the name itself was not important and that, ultimately, they were giving a name to an energy experience that did not have clear feminine characteristics. EPs stated that when she was walking around the floor, she might identify with Sekhmet, Isis or Babalon, or whatever she felt she needed at that moment; however, when she was seated on the altar she identified with Nuit.[38] Despite this characterization, the energy she feels on the altar is not necessarily masculine or feminine, but does have an active quality to it. She explained:

> It's called Nuit in the Mass but, see, I don't feel like I'm Nuit. I'm channeling the Holy Spirit through and when I'm sitting on the altar, I can feel the energy just going through me … The energy starts going up, the kundalini is rising and that's just what I'm doing: I'm present on the altar and I'm focused on the Priest … When I'm on the altar, I become very

[37] Ibid.

[38] EPs, recorded interview by phone A02, February 8, 2014.

> open, so it changes. But I don't even think of it as masculine or feminine.[39]

NLPs stated that although she didn't identify with a goddess while on the altar, she was willing to give it the name Babalon, but rejected the idea that the energy itself was clearly feminine.[40] When asked if she did not identify with a goddess because she herself was not present in that moment to have such an identification, she responded:

> It's because putting a name or anyone else's idea on what I'm experiencing wouldn't be accurate. I'm not an historic being that anyone has envisioned. I am having my own experience and it's where it is. But, it's most certainly something that's not me and it's not human. I'll name Babalon for a nice generic name.[41]

The difficulty with naming the energy felt by the Priestess is that it is inherently tied to her personal response to an internal experience of an energy which may not be itself feminine. To ask what god or goddess she identifies with as Priestess is to perhaps ask her what she feels in reaction to the energy rather than what she knows about the nature of the energy itself. It seems apparent, however, that while these four Priestesses designated a feminine quality to how they felt seated on the altar, they did not strongly associate that feeling with the name or attributes of a particular god or goddess.

Identifying the Goddess: Two Priests' Experiences

When asked if they identify the Priestess with a god or goddess, two Priests suggested that they did but that they also perceived her as a woman, their woman (as partner or wife), all women and the feminine. BPt, who is paired with a close friend,

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[39] Ibid.; EPs, recorded interview in person A01, November 2, 2013.

[40] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014.

[41] Ibid.

described his changing perception of the Priestess from her opening of the tomb to his opening of the veil:

> For me, at that point [of opening the tomb], she is just a woman. And I don't want to say "just" a woman as belittling it in any way, but she is *a* woman. To me, she is a woman that just pulls man out of nothing and I am just a man … and I don't really see her as any specific divine element. [After he lifts her up as Virgin,] she kind of turns into *my* woman. "And I take thee," now we're *the* man and woman; before it was just, *a* man and *a* woman … She becomes my counterpart when I lift her up. I see her as, let's say, my alchemical wife.
>
> But once I kind of place her upon the summit of the earth [the altar], I'm recognizing in myself that she now becomes a vessel and a person or divine essence of adoration. She becomes my centerpiece in my worship and my devotion … From beyond the veil she responds to that now as the invocation to Nuit. And that's the first time I'm hearing these things and she's telling me, "To me, To me," and "I am this and I am that". Then it starts hitting me: This is Nuit! Now, she's becoming Nuit to me … We've identified ourselves as Nuit and Hadit … And now we're coming together, we're going to invoke the energy of the Gnostic Mass. Now we're starting to get to "Thou who art One, Lord of the Universe, the Sun" which is pretty much the central object of worship for us, the energy of life, love, liberty and light.
>
> [The veil is opened, and she is revealed …] She is the divine feminine is all of her aspects: Diana, Ishtar, Babalon, Nuit, Venus … She is the grand archetype of the feminine principle. For me, it's beyond Babalon or Nuit or any of that stuff, it's all of them and none of them … I can tell you as a man, when I'm standing in front of a naked woman, it gets me going. It inspires me, it makes me feel like, I feel alive, I feel like a man. I feel like the energies as a man in me moving … I adore her, she's beautiful to me … And I just want to be a part of her. She inspires me to be a man. [42]

Another Priest, LPt, when asked with which god or goddess he identified the Priestess, suggested that although the Priestess represents the mother-goddess Babalon,

[42] BPt, recorded interview by phone E02, August 2, 2014. This response was a step-by-step explanation of what happens at each point in the ritual and how he then perceives the Priestess. The ellipses represent omissions of repetition and further explanation of the steps and the invocation of Hadit. The paragraph spacing is added for legibility.

who herself represents the infinite and always-veiled Nuit, the Priestess is always also fully herself, a mysterious, powerful and infinite person:

> She's officiating, essentially as a Priestess of Babalon. Babalon being that All Mother, All Begetting, All Devouring … And that's as far as you can see, as a congregant or as a Priest when I'm interacting with her, the physical, the manifestation of Her is only going to be Babalon, in terms of the outer. Now, the thing is Babalon is also called the little sister of Nuit. Nuit is the star goddess, right? So, when she's up there, she quotes Nuit, but notice how she quotes Nuit from behind the veil. You don't see that and one of the reasons for that is that it's infinite. There's no way to pin it down, you can't pin down Nuit. You can't pin down infinite space … So the Priestess is representative of, let's say when she first shows up, she's a Priestess of Babalon, she's a Priestess of that energy. Then when she's on the altar, then she's a representative of the goddess Babalon, right? But the goddess Babalon is simply herself a representative of Nuit. Right? And Nuit is herself nothingness, for instance: "Let them not speak of me as one but as none, and let them not speak of me at all since thou art continuous." Right? The truth of it is even beyond anything that we can say or talk about …
>
> The other answer I'm going to give you is that it's LPs [his wife's name], it's LPs that comes and gets me. She's LPs as the Priestess, she's LPs. I take her up on the altar, she is LPs, and she is all of those things. Like right now, she's hanging with my kid. Up there, she's the Priestess, she's Babalon, she's Nuit, she's all things. It doesn't change. She's all women to me, and in particularly my wife. You are all this infinite thing, you're all this godhead that I'm interacting with. You are initiating me at each point because you are mysterious from the standpoint of you're just like me but not. Right? There's something different. There's a way that we interact that is special. And so, LPs when she's up on the altar, she's not a representation of Babalon or Nuit, she's my wife. She's the person I know who's now a powerful being and she's going through and expressing herself fully as a human being.[43]

Representing the Feminine: Fertility and Blood

If the Priestess represents the feminine in the ritual, both as a human woman and as a channel for a divine or archetypal feminine energy, how is this femininity

[43] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014. Please note that it is a much more emphatic and evocative statement when the Priest uses his wife's first name than when that name is transcribed as a code. This is a continuous response, with minor omissions. Paragraph spacing is added for legibility.

recognized? Can any woman be a Priestess? What qualities would a particular woman have to have to make her an ideal Priestess? Answers to these questions are deeply influenced by personal and social attitudes about fertility, image and feminism. Although there are many aspects of the ritual which express overt or hidden concepts about the feminine, these respondents were questioned more specifically about the importance of the reproductive status of the Priestess, the image of the Priestess as perceived by the Priest or the congregation, and reactions to the perception that this ritual might be considered antifeminist.

The Gnostic Mass is a public ritual but attending the ritual requires taking communion, which means eating the consecrated cookies, or Cakes of Light, drinking the consecrated wine or grape juice, and declaring "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods." The Cakes of Light are made according to a recipe found in *The Book of the Law*: Meal, honey, reduced red wine, Oil of Abramelin (made of myrrh, cinnamon and other plant oils), olive oil and "rich fresh blood."[44] This blood may be from several sources, including blood of the moon, blood of a child, or blood of the Priest, but in local practice it seems to be either the Priestess' menstrual blood or blood from the Priest's pricked finger, burned to a fine ash and used in a minuscule amount.[45] The Priestess makes her

[44] The description of the offering to Ra-Hoor-Khuit (Horus) reads: "For perfume mix meal & honey & think leavings of red wine: then oil of Abramelin and olive oil, and afterward soften & smooth down with rich fresh blood. The best blood is of the month, monthly: then the fresh blood of a child, or dropping from the host of heaven: then of enemies: then of the priest of the worshippers: last of some beast, no matter what. This burn: of this make cakes & eat unto me …" *The Book of the Law, Liber AL* III:23-25.

[45] The E.G.C. requires modern sanitary practices, including desiccating bodily fluids. There are hints in the literature that the other options might include a mixture of sperm and blood or post-coital fluid. The term "child" is used within the ritual in many ways, and interpretation of the "blood of a child" could include the blood of a Child or semen. It is important to note that the recipe of the offering was written in 1904, at least eight years before the Gnostic Mass was written in 1913.

decision based on individual preference, timing or menopause: One Priestess confirmed she typically uses menstrual blood while another said she routinely uses the Priest's blood. NLPs addresses other possible variances in the ingredients:

> The very first comment that Crowley wrote was [that] each person was to interpret *The Book of the Law* for themselves with reference to his writings only. Because it was a line from the Holy Book, well, there are going to be a lot of interpretations. And the grand lodge, the U.S. Grand Lodge, has issued some requirements to make sure that whatever it is that people are doing out there, it's safe. Beyond that we don't tell people. So "blood of a child," I would assume, or maybe "blood of the Priest," … Maybe some people are interpreting that as semen and we can't say they can't interpret it that way.[46]

While the ingredients of the Cakes of Light are still somewhat obscure, the description and preservation of this practice points to the importance of fertility and menstrual blood in *The Book of the Law*, in the Gnostic Mass liturgy and in current practice.[47]

Two local Priestesses and the nonlocal Priestess discussed this question of the Priestess' fertility in more detail. BPs mentioned that in her opinion any Priestesses who could biologically have children could "complete the formula." When asked about Priestesses who had had hysterectomies or were post-menopausal, she suggested that "fitting the part," or putting herself in the mindset of being fertile or at least not perceiving it as a lack, was important:

> It's up to her. If that's the only thing she thinks about and she can't get past how, like, "I can't have kids and I'm not a woman," that's like a [psychological] complex for her. That will come out in the Mass for sure.

[46] NLPs, email follow-up, August 10, 2014.

[47] It is interesting to note, however, that blood is not an offering for Nuit, who is infinite: "I give unimaginable joys on earth: certainty, not faith, while in life, upon death; peace unutterable, rest, ecstasy; nor do I demand aught in sacrifice. My incense is of resinous woods & gums; and there is no blood therein: because my hair the trees of Eternity." *The Book of the Law, Liber AL* I:58-59.

> But if she's like, "It is what it is, let's just keep living …" I'm sure they can go to that head space as well as I can.[48]

Another Priestess, LPs, suggested that while having a hysterectomy did not change the status of a woman as a woman, no longer being able to have children was less than ideal for a Priestess. In her response, she also indicated that perhaps cessation of the "mystical lifeblood" might actually be the significant difference, rather than infertility per se:

> Just because you remove your uterus doesn't mean you're not a woman anymore. We don't have three genders, four genders; we have two genders. So, just because you remove your uterus, doesn't mean you're not female. You still check female on the form. If you were infertile … Let's say you were of childbearing age and you were infertile, I think you should still be a Priestess then. Here's the question: Will I stop being the Priestess when I can no longer bear children? I don't know. I might choose to stop. I think the ideal situation would be a female of childbearing age who is capable of having children but I'm not going to tell someone they can't do the Mass … But, you know, I kind of feel like it's a stance I could see myself taking: Once I hit menopause [and] I don't get my period anymore, that whole mystical lifeblood thing, I could see myself not doing Mass anymore [in order] to prop up other women doing the Mass.[49]

Nonetheless, another Priestess, NLPs, emphasized that being fertile or appearing to be fertile is not at all necessary since the Priestess embodies an archetype, not necessarily a particular feminine image. When asked whether a hysterectomy or a mastectomy would affect the ritual, she said that while some congregants may think they need a particular feminine image, for the purposes of the "magical working" the Priestess need only be able to embody the feminine archetype and this did not require sexual reproductive

[48] BPs, recorded interview in person B01, January 30, 2014.

[49] LPs, recorded interview by phone E01, February 27, 2014.

vitality. She also explained that the first Priestess she saw, who also ordained and trained her, was post-menopausal, so "it's never been in my psyche that you had to be fertile."[50]

Representing the Feminine: Image and Devotion

A woman seated on a raised altar who is veiled and unveiled, speaks for the unseen, holds sacred objects and maintains a steady pose with her arms upraised is herself a visual object in the ritual, an icon of sorts. Her image is evocative and transformative but also provides a fulcrum and anchor for the ritual and the activities of the Priest. How does the image of the Priestess contribute to or distract from the Mass? Are there physical characteristics of the Priestess that impact the performance of the Mass for the officers or for the congregation? A brief survey of the videos and photographs readily available on the Internet of Gnostic Mass Priestesses illustrate a variety of body types, ages, weights and aesthetic qualities. The interviewees were in agreement that there were a few physical requirements for the Priestess' performance, such as the ability to walk, kneel, speak clearly, handle objects, hold up both arms for an extended period, and sit comfortably. While one Priestess, NLPs, speculated that some physical challenges to performance might have workable solutions such as recording responses for someone who was mute, another Priestess LPs felt that some conditions such as stroke would prohibit the role of the Priestess.

Less clear in the role of the Priestess, however, are aesthetic factors such as hair color, hair length, tattoos, scars, weight, or hygiene. Although the Priestess has the option of resuming her robe before the unveiling of the altar, nudity is the norm and nudity necessarily adds additional visual information which might or might not affect the Priest

[50] NLPs, email follow-up, August 10, 2014.

or the congregation.[51] For example, NLPs stated a woman who has had a double mastectomy without reconstructive surgery and chooses to disrobe might perhaps affect the expectations of the Priest or the congregation but she might still be effective as a Priestess:

> I can't speak to individuals of the congregation, doubtless some of them would have a hard time getting over it because they are individuals and everybody is at their own stage of development. They see what they see. [But] for magical working, no, oh heavens, no. It shouldn't make the least difference … There are a lot of young guys who will tell you that it's just not a Mass if the woman isn't hot … We're limited by it when all that they're seeing is the physical. Then they're kind of missing the magic and I hope they get beyond that because that's where the real earth-shattering and glory of the ceremony comes in, not the physical.[52]

One Priest, BPt, suggests that while an attractive Priestess may hold the attention of the congregation, a less attractive Priestess might be a better Priestess due to her ability as a magician, a performer or a medium (channel). He suggests that a Priestess who can tap into and share the Mass energies can perform the Priestess role well regardless of her body shape:

> I had a lot of respect for the Priestess after that. It really changed the way that I saw her because it was such a position of power that I'm not used to seeing in a lot of women, especially seeing how comfortable she was with her body. I mean, even at the time, she was overweight and I guess society might kind of view being overweight as like, unhealthy and not attractive, as it were. I'll admit, when I saw her in all her glory as overweight as she was, she was stunningly beautiful to me. Like my god, you are amazing … Because she was elevating herself, or she was attuning herself to a higher purpose, it was a higher goal for her. It was a higher sense of reasoning

[51] In the nine masses observed, the priestess was fully nude six out of nine. In one mass, the priestess who re-robed wore the robe slightly parted but draped for privacy. In the second mass with this priestess, she disrobed. In the third mass, which was video-taped in preparation for another recorded mass which would be posted online, the same priestess was fully covered. One priestess wore panties only. In three cases, they continued to wear a necklace after disrobing.

[52] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014.

> instead of just the normal preconceived notions of everyday social consciousness. I thought that she was tapping into something that was bigger than she was, which is what made it for her to easily be naked in front of a bunch of people. Not a lot of people can do that. That takes a lot of balls.
>
> Of course, if there's a sense of attraction there, people are more attentive to you if you're attractive. That's your power. But that doesn't mean that you have to be attractive to be an affective Priestess. I think on the contrary, in a lot of ways. You can be the most beautiful person ever, but if you suck as a magician/performer/medium then your Mass sucked no matter how beautiful you are. And you could the ugliest person in the world but if you are an amazing magician, performer and medium, then you're going to be an amazing Mass Priestess … If they are an effective magician, they will be able to transport you practically anywhere.[53]

Another Priest, LPt, stressed that presenting an image that looks like the transformative archetype is an important aspect of the ritual itself. He suggested that if the intent is to model the archetype, then certain expectations should be met, which might include gender and attractiveness:

> I feel the same way about women who are overweight. I feel the same way about women who are extremely underweight. I feel the same way about women who are maybe in a wheelchair or something. I think that it's not about your right to be there … Everyone thinks of it as a reflection on yourselves if you're not supposed to be on the altar … It's about what is the point of the ritual. Who is it for? You know? I think that really intelligent well-meaning people can all disagree on it. And I'm not trying to demonize or vilify any of the people who disagree with me, because I think every single person is worthy of understanding, right? But if we sit there and say, the purpose of this ritual is to draw an archetype out of consciousness and you're going to have up there this fat, tattooed person who's like a mouth-breather, sorry, but that's not the archetype of Nuit or of Babalon or … it's just not …
>
> If we're talking about all the Priestess dynamics with the goddess and all that stuff, you know, is your archetype someone missing an arm? Now, now, can we get to a point … here's what I think is the interesting thing …

[53] BPt, recorded interview by phone E02, August 2, 2014. Magician, performer, and medium were terms used by the researcher to try to focus on the subtleties of roles and activities. Using these together, the priest is trying to encompass all three types of action; however, the researcher's vocabulary was clearly unwieldy to him.

> closer to the point where someone missing an arm is also an archetype? Can we get to that level of acceptance? Because it is, I mean, like Odin lost an arm and an eye, right? So I think instead of trying to shove somebody up there because they deserve to be up there, I think we could actually think about this. Like, okay, how do we use someone who is overweight, tattooed and a mouth-breather? Where do they fit into our archetypal consciousness and how can we elevate them to the level of god-status? How can I elevate myself to the level of god-status? Through interacting with them honestly, not lying to myself … There's a lot more work to be done in terms with how we interact with each other on a spiritual level, and I don't think the way forward is just to pretend that, you know, there's not a problem and shove someone up there and just [say,] Well, yeah look how tolerant and accepting we are. I think that's the wrong way.[54]

Assuming that presenting a particular image or archetype in the ritual is an important aspect of the ritual as a transformative experience, what do the Priestesses say about their interaction with the congregation? Are they serving the ritual as a visual focus of transformation? Are they offering their image as an object of devotion, similar to *darshan* in which the devotee is both seeing and being seen by the divine in an act of pilgrimage? All three of the local Priestesses denied looking directly at the congregation at any point, and, further stated that they did not want to be perceived as an image for worship or devotion.[55] BPs suggests that not looking directly at the congregation helps her focus the energy of the Mass:

> I don't make eye contact. I honestly don't know who's where. I don't even sometimes know who's there until the end. I had to work at that. I mean, that's super difficult, but that's one of my ultimate goals is not interact with the congregation. For me, [the Priestess'] indirect role to the congregation is to be a being that is so pure that you can invoke the divine

[54] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014.

[55] One Priestess, LPs, noted that before they had Children to serve the Cakes of Light and the wine to the congregation, she and the Priest would do it themselves. At that time, she would look them in the eyes and smile. Now that there are Children, she no longer looks at the congregation. LPs, recorded interview by phone E01, February 27, 2014.

> at will. So, like a role-modeling relationship, for me … [During the congregation's communion,] the Priest is right in my face, so I'm still not even … We're very focused on each other at that point. There's a lot of energy that we're trying to keep reined in, so it's a very focused moment, for me.[56]

Interestingly, while the Priestess faces the congregation for much of the ritual, the Priest only faces the congregation three times during the ritual. However, all three Priests said they only engage directly with the congregation when they deliver the blessing after all the congregants have communed. This may be due to common training methods; for example, in *To Perfect this Feast*, the Priest is instructed to look at the congregation and make eye contact for the first time at the blessing.[57] LPt, a Priest, describes this as a deliberate withholding and releasing of energy in order to produce a "bigger effect":

> It just depends on the Priest but the way that I was trained was that the first time you look at the congregation is at the end when you give the blessing … The way that I really think about it is, that I'm saving myself … The entire time I'm focusing on the Priestess or the Deacon, if I need to communicate with him. And I'm saving that energy and I'm kind of like building it by ignoring the congregation, I'm like building this reservoir of force for them, so that when I turn around and I make eye contact with them, I can hit them with an intention, with a sincere intention, right? So that's the way EPt taught me. I like that. I like that idea. I also like the idea that you connect with them after they have said, "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods." Because now you're a consecrated Priest, you're dealing only with the goddess, so if I'm … You don't go from the lower, to the higher, to the lower, you don't sit there and say, well, yes, now I'm going to you little people and give you a blessing. No, now you're all gods so the same interaction that I just had with her, I may have with all of you … Because think about this, think about if you consecrate. Something now is very holy, very special, and it's only meant now for interaction with divinity, right? That's consecration. It's only for interaction with the divine force. Well, do you then turn around and put towards a mundane force? Why do that when instead you can lift, you can make everything

[56] BPs, recorded interview in person B01, January 30, 2014.

[57] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 112, 114, 116.

> around you divine and now all the interactions around are at the highest level, right?[58]

Priestess and bishop EPs pointed out that her role in the Mass is as a channel, or conduit, for energy but not as an embodiment of a personified divinity. In her experience, the congregation does not gain anything by looking for a devotional connection with her as Priestess, since the energy is actually flowing through to the Priest who then passes it to the congregation. She explains the differences between the Mass and *darshan*:

> I don't care what the congregation is doing frankly because my focus is on the energy and on the Priest. I never look at the congregation. I never pay any attention to them. If somebody passes out in the middle of the Mass, I don't care. It's sort of the Deacon's job to take care of them. The congregation … Well, in my case, I find that they don't [interact devotionally.] I don't want them interacting with me. They're not getting anything from interacting with me. In other bodies it's really common for the congregants to communicate separately in front of the Priestess, and they think they are getting some sort of, you know, divine energy from the Priestess, and they're not. Because that Priestess actually, in my opinion, dissipates the energy of the Mass. We're trying to hold on to the energy for that final blessing. The individual communication, they're doing some sort of *darshan* with the Priestess, but that's not the point. The Priestess isn't the point; it's the energy. I mean you can exchange all kinds of energy in interaction by gazing, you know, at other people. There's a lot of energy that can pass at a glance, right? Or in focused gazing. But that's not the point of this.[59]

Even though all three of the local Priestesses consciously avoid looking directly at the congregants, they still create an image for the Priestess role through clothing, weapons, jewelry and make-up. They wear the required robes and sword which help form the image of the Virgin girt with a sword who is "shameless before all men."[60] Although

[58] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014.

[59] EPs, recorded interview by phone A02, February 8, 2014.

[60] From *The Book of the Law*. *Liber AL* III:11; *Liber AL* III:44

the robe colors are specified as white, blue and gold with a red girdle, each Priestess designs her own robe and girdle of varying length, patterns and textures.[61] One local Priestess had a bright blue robe with silver stars, cut in a wide-armed style reminiscent of a kimono over a white robe, belted with a red sash for her sword. The visiting Mass Priestess brought her own cup, censor and bowls for the altars which seemed to have a Greco-Roman theme in keeping with her robe which was bright blue with a Greek key trim. If the Priestess has long hair, she might either wear her hair down throughout the ritual or let it down behind the veil. In eight of the nine Masses observed, the local Priestesses wore their hair up while walking the floor and then let down their hair for the unveiling; in the other Mass, the Priestess wore her hair down the entire time. They might also voluntarily reinforce the image of Nuit from *The Book of the Law* by wearing a necklace or blue eye shadow.[62] At six of the nine Masses, the Priestesses wore necklaces, three even while nude, and at seven Masses, the Priestesses wore blue eye shadow. These ornamentations are not specified in the Mass ritual instructions but are implied in Nuit's speech:

> Sing the rapturous love-song unto me! Burn to me perfumes! Wear to me jewels! Drink to me, for I love you! I am the blue-lidded daughter of Sunset; I am naked brilliance of the voluptuous night sky. To me! To me![63]

[61] Like the Gnostic Mass altar design, there is a great deal of flexibility of design among the robes of the officers within the liturgy specifications.

[62] Or, as one Priest LPt suggested, the manifestation of Nuit may be Babalon, her little sister, since Nuit is infinite. LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014.

[63] From *The Book of the Law*. *Liber AL* I:63-65.

However, when asked if Priestesses construct the visual experience of the Mass through these voluntary elements, NLPs, who as a Priestess wears her hair down, a necklace and, often, blue eye shadow during the Mass, stated that:

> I've never looked at it that way in the least. Maybe a tiny bit when I come in as Virgin but by the time I'm transformed and carried away in the ritual, I could care less what people out there are seeing. It doesn't occur to me in the least. I like, in some ways, my fingernails painted so that you can see the movements of my hands. That makes a difference to me, but that's just me. I see the ritual, the magical beings … Really, if their clothing or regalia are attracting my attention in any way, I would consider that a distraction.[64]

Representing the Feminine: Feminism and Empowerment

For nonmembers, the defining image of the Gnostic Mass might be the naked Priestess seated on a high altar draped in red cloth and surrounded by candles. One might reasonably ask why a contemporary woman would choose to perform a hundred-year old ritual in which she is called Virgin, led to an altar, consecrated and veiled, only to be unveiled as a stiffly-posed, naked and silent woman. Although several answers are implied from the Priestess' descriptions of first seeing the Mass and from their views of the role of the Priestess, they were also asked how they respond to the suggestion this ritual is "anti-feminist." Although this phrasing begs the question somewhat, it was readily accepted as a pertinent question. The answers varied widely as Priestesses interpreted the question from the viewpoint of power or choice within the ritual, power or choice in the O.T.O. as compared to Wicca, or personal comfort with nakedness. One aspect which was not associated with the question of anti-feminism was the historical or current use of the title "Scarlet Woman." EPs explained that "Scarlet Woman" was a title

[64] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014.

held only by Crowley's partners and was not an appropriate title for other Priestesses; even so, during the interviews, The *Book of the Law* was frequently cited as the source for descriptions of the Priestess' role such as "girt with a sword" and "shameless before all men," which may refer to the Scarlet Woman.[65] However, none of the Priestesses used the term "Scarlet Woman" to refer to themselves or their role, nor did any Priest refer to a Priestess or the role of the Priestess as "Scarlet Woman." It is uncertain what effect the ritual roles of women in other Crowley materials and rituals have on these Priestesses, either directly through their own studies or indirectly via modelling or performance guides, which may themselves be influenced by other Crowley materials and rituals or by Agapé Lodge Mass performances.

One Priestess, BPs, suggested that the O.T.O. attracted women who were "alpha females" and that feminism as she understood it did not apply. When discussing whether it might or might not be a common personality trait for the Priestess to take charge before the opening of the Mass, she said, "The O.T.O. has a lot of alpha females though so I can't imagine that kind of beta Priestess. I feel like she won't be able to do it."[66] But when asked if she thought that the role of the Priestess, especially when naked on the altar, was anti-feminist, she stated that:

> I don't. And that whole feminist thing? Maybe I just don't identify enough with maybe what they really mean. But I don't … And I'm a little weird, I think we should go back to caveman times of alpha-beta [laughs]. I feel like that works in nature. So, I might be a fringe answer of this question but for me it's like the most feminine thing I could do. I think you have to experience it for yourself before you can make a decision, and I don't think probably anybody will … I'm sure most people have not, who have

[65] *Liber AL* III:11 and 44; EPs, recorded interview in person A01, November 2, 2013.

[66] BPs, recorded interview in person B01, January 30, 2014.

> that opinion … To be naked in front of people is, to me, so invulnerable. I don't know even how to explain that. I have found strength in it and it goes against a lot of societal norms, I think, [that suggest] I should be so meek … But going back to how some people can call it anti-feminist or misogynistic or whatever along those lines, I think you see that if you're looking for it. For me it's not there, it was never there.[67]

As a follow-up question she was asked: If the only person naked in the room is the woman and she's on the altar, is that worshipping the feminine or using the feminine? She suggested that a ritual that elevated the feminine too much would disrupt the "exaltation of man and woman":

> I would never rewrite the ritual, that's not what I mean, but for me, it can go too much to goddess worship … It's a little too goddess-y for me, because I don't want it to be that. Because there's a man and woman and a formula, you know … I think when it starts to get goddess-y, that puts the woman kind of as the alpha to the male, and I think that doesn't work.[68]

When asked if the male was alpha in the male-female couple, she said yes. When asked if there is an alpha among Priestesses, she said, "I guess only in the sense that we would defer to EPs, not because she is EPs or because she could beat us up, but because she's done it for thirty years."[69] Interestingly, all four Priestesses said that there was no specific organization of Priestesses or a "High Priestess" to mentor, lead or represent the Priestesses as a group. LPs said though they intend to have a local Priestess get-together, they never do because of scheduling conflicts.[70] Nonetheless, BPs described the

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

[70] LPs, recorded interview by phone E01, February 27, 2014.

relationship between the local Priestesses as harmonious, adding, "But we work it, we make sure it's harmonious."[71]

In discussing the role of the Priestess, LPs said that she thought men were more drawn to "iniatic structure," or the esoteric which is "male-dominated," because they are not "initiated by nature."[72] She referred to menarche as a "intense initiation" and to childbirth as "the most amazing initiation I have ever had in my life."[73] When asked if it was a contradiction that a woman could be a magician and a star, with their own will, whole and complete, but yet in the ritual be focused primarily on the feminine, she said:

> I don't think it's a contradiction and I've never really thought of it that way. I guess I would feel that way if women were only allowed to be the Priestess. You can be the positive Child, the negative Child. You could be the Deacon. Really, the only role you can't be is the Priest and that's because you don't have a penis. So it never really offended me, because I don't have a penis. So, I think how I feel about that is, I think it's beautiful, personally. I think that "Every woman and every man is a star" doesn't mean we're the same, it just means we are valued. That we have equal importance but the way we express that importance is completely different. And if it was even talked about being the same, I actually would be offended because it's not the same.[74]

Three of the four Priestess stated that they had considered Gardnerian Wicca before discovering the O.T.O. but had been put off by the hierarchal system, by bickering among the covens, or by rudeness. Bishop and Priestess, EPs, points out that the O.T.O. is run very differently than the covens and, in her opinion provides more opportunity and less gender restrictions than Wicca. She explains:

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[71] BPs, recorded interview in person B01, January 30, 2014.

[72] LPs, recorded interview by phone E01, February 27, 2014.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

> The Priestess comes out already a Priestess, and already able to consecrate water and fire, and confer the Priesthood – to give the Priesthood to somebody else as well as kingship. That's the first indication that we get that the woman in the Mass is actually spiritually superior, even when she's just walking into the room. She's able to raise the necessary energy on her own during the first part of the Mass. Crowley as controversial as he was … what really clenched it for me, when I was just starting out, was his line, and I'm probably just slaughtering this but … It's where he says that women and men are equal within Thelema, that women can be considered companions in arms, with our own spears and our own shields, equally ready to go out and do battle. And that clenched it for me … The solar energy, the solar world within Thelema, because that's our focus, we're very solar-phallic, it offers so many more possibilities than the sequestered, more lunar current within paganism and Wicca, to me … Women in the O.T.O. are on equal footing. We can do anything that we want. We don't have specific roles … We can be a lodge master, we can be a Priestess, we can be a bishop, we can run the treasury, we can do all these things. I think there are less gender roles within the O.T.O. than there are within the Craft … It's really easy to have somebody to tell you what to do; it's more empowering to figure it out for yourself.[75]

At the end of the Gnostic Mass, the Priest consumes the consecrated host and wine on the altar and then, still facing the altar, announces, "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods." The congregants then communicate, each taking a Cake of Light and a small glass of wine from the serving trays held by the Children. After they have eaten and drunk, they also announce the same. Only the Children, the Deacon, and the Priestess do not take communion or speak the proclamation. The liturgy specifically dictates this: "The Priestess and other officers never partake of the Sacrament, they being as it were part of the Priest himself."[76] Although this practice might be an indicator of a Priest-centric motivation for the Mass, bishop and Priestess NLPs, suggests that some Priestesses may perceive this moment differently:

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[75] EPs, recorded interview in person A01, November 2, 2013.

[76] *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements."

> To people who are not really familiar with the Mass, they believe that the Priest is doing the ceremony, the ritual, and the Priestess is just sitting there passive. That's what it looks like because the Priest is the one who's running around and waving a stick in the air and saying all the lines, right? He seems to be center stage, but if you talk to an experienced Priest and most of the Priestesses, they'll tell you that the one who is directing it is the Priestess. And the Priest, you get the sensation that … Do you remember there's a line at the end: "The officers do not commune, they being part of the Priest"? Well, that was written by the Priest [Crowley]. I can tell you from the Priestess perspective, the Priest is being my hands and mouth. He's taking the communion, in a sense, he's doing the actions but it's my communion. That's something which an awful lot of Priestesses have the feeling that's really quite their ritual and the other officers are simply aspects of them.[77]

Gender, Sexuality and Polarity in the Gnostic Mass

In attempt to understand why the Priestess must be a woman and the Priest must be a man, the respondents were asked: What makes the ritual work? Or, in other words, what is the particular "formula" for the Gnostic Mass? All seven agreed that the ritual was modelled on the procreative, heterosexual union of a woman and a man; however, they had somewhat different ways of expressing why that would be the model. A good Mass pair did not necessarily have to be romantically or sexually involved, but performing well required at least a strong physical and emotional rapport between them. Three respondents mentioned that for even a married pair, a serious disagreement could result in poor Mass performance. However, for each interviewee, the biological experience of the physical body appeared to be an important factor in the purpose and efficacy of the ritual. Each expressed the idea that the different energies which women and men bring to the ritual mirror in some way the sex designation of the physical body. Spiritual union is the conjoining of two different energies as expressed by the mutually

[77] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014. It appears that the Mass ritual was written by the Priest, Crowley, but *The Book of the Law* is a holy book channeled by the Priest and Prophet, Crowley.

exclusive genders, male or female, found in the respective physical bodies and life experiences of a man or of a woman.[78]

One Priestess, BPs, suggested that the Mass celebrated the "exaltation of man and woman" in which the man and woman work together to perfect themselves so that they might create a child, or an intentional result:

> It's about man and woman, each one achieving their potential. So it's not about the man or the woman, it's really about being your perfected self. But this is the formula that works scientifically, like a man and a woman create a [physical] child … This can be also like an archetype for the result of your ritual, of your life's work. … I feel like the Mass could be the child. Sometimes I think of it in those terms, like it's the result product of unifying energy in a certain way. [79]

Her partner, BPt, stated that the purpose of the Mass was to give birth to the New Aeon, the child Ra-Hoor-Khuit, through the conjoining of the female Nuit and the male Hadit as described in *The Book of the Law*.[80]

> The conjoining of a man and a woman has a particular sense of sanctity and divinity … It is unlike anything that you could personally deal with separately, but when you come together you create something more than and beyond the two of you. There's a lot of great energy that can be worked when a man and a woman conjoin … I feel that down to the chromosomes, down to the DNA, there is something happening biologically within us and our respective genders when we're performing the Mass that I feel is more conducive for that energy, if the people there are properly aligned with themselves and with their biological entity, their own personal physical biological body, their temple.[81]

[78] It is important to note that most of the interviewees mentioned that this gender emphasis was truer of the Gnostic Mass ritual than of the O.T.O. rituals and degrees generally.

[79] BPs, recorded interview in person B01, January 30, 2014.

[80] BPt, recorded interview by phone E02, August 2, 2014.

[81] Ibid.

Another Priestess, LPs emphasized the biological natures of the Priestess and the Priest, stating that the Priestess initiates the Priest due to the nature of womanhood, because she is the "woman of maturity [who has] been through the stuff of womanliness".[82] Women are Priestesses because they have been initiated by their own bodies and they express their inner selves through that experience:

> The way the Gnostic Mass works is: She is a Priestess before the Mass starts but the Priest is not a Priest before she ordains him … By the nature of being a woman, we are initiated by nature. I know when I got my period for the first time, that was a really intense initiation and just now having given birth, that is the most amazing initiation I have ever had in my life … The energy that a man brings is not the same as the energy a woman brings and if someone were to say that to me, I would be upset … So that's why I think that only women can be Priestesses and only men can be Priests because the way we pour forth our inner self is different.

EPt, Priest and Bishop, explained that the Gnostic Mass was a polar ritual, a "communal or tantric ceremony," in which magicians direct their focused wills through the facets of gender and biological nature, bringing the physical into the spiritual through an alchemical transformation of two into one:

> The symbolism of the Mass is the symbolism of the Great Work. You have an aspirant, below, approaching, let's say, the holy space, the Great Mother, or whatever you want to call it … There is a male-female interplay there. It is the same interplay that is going into *The Book of the Law* with Hadit and Nuit. It's a sexual, heterosexual, male-female, gender-identified, role-specific sexuality that's being celebrated as an aspect of the one god. He, or She, or It is divided for the sake, or the chance of union. I mean, that's sexual, okay? You could say that there's an eroticism of homosexuality and I would agree, but that is not the Gnostic Mass. That would be a homosexual erotic ritual that would be either male or female specific that would talk about the god, or goddess, or the one god, whatever you want to call it, and I call it It, divided into the same two aspects or the same identity, the same gender, celebrating union with each

[82] LPs, recorded interview by phone E01, February 27, 2014.

> other in a sexual way. There are no objections to that stuff, but it's not the Gnostic Mass.[83]

LPt explains that just as a practice Mass without all five officers and at least one congregant is not the Gnostic Mass as written by Aleister Crowley so, too, a Mass in which the Priestess and Priest were same-sex or transsexual would not technically be Crowley's *Liber XV* but a new ritual:

> These roles are not about sexual preference. You could have a gay Priest and a lesbian Priestess, so? It's not about who you want to sleep with … I think we have all these distinctions completely collapsed where if you're going to be masculine then it means you can't be gay. Well, you could be gay and be masculine, right? I'm 100% in favor of everyone doing what they need to do in their spiritual life. But at the same time, it's not the Gnostic Mass as written by Aleister Crowley … And I totally sympathize with that from the standpoint of sexual freedom, liberty and expressing yourself, and I love that, I totally love that. But okay, so write a new ritual. Write another ritual, even if it mirrors Crowley's ritual, but claim responsibility for it because Crowley didn't write that … And I think we're in a generation that could be proud of that and take responsibility for it, rather than just whitewash the old ways and put our new democratic, equalitarian morals on something that was written a hundred years ago. To me, it does a disservice to the progress that we've made and it also does a disservice to the original intent of the ritual.[84]

While none of the local Priestesses or Priests accept temporary or transitional gender identification as a qualification to perform publicly as Priestess or Priest in the Gnostic Mass, the Priestesses were more likely to accept transsexual Priestesses with permanent gender reassignment (two of three), whereas the Priests were more likely to insist that biological sex at birth is paramount (two of three).[85] During the interviews, the

[83] EPt, recorded interview in person A01, November 2, 2013.

[84] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014.

[85] This specific example was brought up in each interview as a way to help define the role of the Priestess. The distinction was made clear by local interviewees that even for those who accepted transsexual Priestesses, a socially-permanent, and preferably a surgically-permanent, commitment would be necessary.

Priestesses seemed to need additional background information about the queer Mass debate, but the Priests were already aware of both the debate and the book *Priest/less* by Michael Effertz.[86] When asked why the women seemed less interested in the debate about public performance of same-sex, transsexual or queer Mass, several thought it might be that men were more likely to be interested in the Priestess's role than women in the Priest's role. LPt speculated about why this might be:

> When it comes to the Mass, I think women are totally into being the Priestesses. I think that there's men who want to do the Priestess role. I think that's really what's going down. The Priestess role is pretty freaking cool, I can see that. There's men who want to do the Priestess role and the thing about magicians and spiritual seekers is that the whole thing is about pushing boundaries, right? The whole thing is about overcoming your limitations. What bigger limitation is there than what's between your legs? I mean, that's a crazy limitation, right? [87]

Priestess and Bishop, NLPs, noted that the head of the church believes that there must be a male Priest and a female Priestess or it's a different ritual, but in her opinion there are also other factors which might make it difficult for most men to perform the Priestess role well:

> I think there are very few people who could pull it off, though. People think they know what it is to be a woman and that they have this in a man's body; okay, maybe this could be so. I have not experienced this, of

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to switch roles. The local interviewees pointed out that same-sex, transgender and queer masses could be performed privately without restriction. It was the public performance that needed to comply with the Gnostic Mass instructions as written by Aleister Crowley and as officially interpreted by E.G.C. leaders. In addition, the local interviewees mentioned that this question only applied to the Priestess and Priest roles, not to the Deacon or Children roles. One Priestess commented briefly on lesbian performance and said that while she knew of several lesbians in the O.T.O., when they performed in the Gnostic Mass, they seemed more frequently to be Deacons. This aspect, and LBGTQ mass performance in general, certainly requires further research.

[86] Michael Effertz, *Priest/less: In Advocacy of Queer Gnostic Mass* (West Hollywood, CA: Luxor Media Group, 2012).

[87] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014.

> course … The thing with the physical gender is that it makes it simpler for the congregation and for the other officers to kind of project god-form onto them. The Mass works, really regardless of the magical knowledge of the officers, the Mass works. I know I could do the Priest role, I have absolutely no doubt with that, and clearly I was not born with the necessary male body parts, but it's okay. I've met very few men that, in my opinion at least, have got the divine feminine as something other than a Greco-Roman statue … Men who have identified most with women, with being a woman, seem the most tied up with the physical aspects. What can I say? And they have in their minds this idea of what it is to be a woman and their idea is so strong that I've known few who actually go beyond it to something that wasn't something they could conceptualize but just be.[88]

That the quality of "feminine" is also used in the ritual in the occult or esoteric sense of receptive, containing or passive in a way that may not be gender-specific, can been illustrated by the comments of two bishops. In the Gnostic Mass, the congregation responds to the Priest's Anthem which invokes the birth of the sacred child (Ra-Hoor-Khuit, or the New Aeon), in part with the phrase,

> For of the Father and the Son
> The Holy Spirit is the norm;
> Male-female, quintessential, one,
> Man-being veiled in woman-form.[89]

When asked about the meaning of "man-being veiled in woman-form," NLPs suggested that a star is masculine if it is contained in the night sky, which is feminine.[90] Clarifying yet further that the quality of femininity may be relational and functional, she stated that, "The being is masculine, the form is feminine. The container is feminine and what it

[88] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014.

[89] *Liber XV*: "VII: Of the Office of the Anthem."

[90] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014.

contains is in relation to the container, is masculine."[91] Priest and Bishop, EPt, suggested that the ultimate proclamation of the Mass, "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods," is the result of a receptive condition in someone who has had their personality shattered and has become a "successfully filled vessel".[92] When discussing the ritual as a type of training which prepares the Priest to commune with the gods, he says:

> I'm doing all this stuff to try and enflame myself, to actively enflame myself, to get to a point where I can be enthusiastic enough and empty enough to receive the Lord and when that happens I am female. I am approaching God as a woman. I am wanting to be filled … Someone who has achieved apotheosis, there's a passivity to that. You have to be indwelt. You can't, you can't do that stuff on your own … In other words, when you are trying to invoke a god, you are more or less saying, there is me and there is you, and I'm trying to have you come inside me. Again, it's very female. An invocation, right? … I'm not thinking stuff. I met the gods, I know who they are. I have no question, who's more powerful, them or me … It's very rare, okay? It's rare enough that I aspire to it constantly.[93]

The Gnostic Mass as a Transformative Performance

While the role of Priestess is performed by a woman and the formula, or way that the ritual works, seems to be based on the biological, heterosexual interaction of a woman and a man, the ritual itself is allows some flexibility in presentation. The performance guide *To Perfect This Feast* notes that the floor layout may vary somewhat by temple, as might the design of the robes and implements, the pattern of Priestess' walk, the use of music and several other elements of enactment.[94] A survey of altar images on the Internet

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[91] Ibid.

[92] EPt, recorded interview in person A01, November 2, 2013.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 54-56, 60-61.

clearly show that although altars must comply with the specific instructions in *Liber XV*, there are still many decorative aspects which result in a variety of altar styles, including ornate altar cloths, candle heights, choice of cup style, and more. One Priestess, NLPs, described a special performance of a Shinto-themed Mass in which these flexible elements allowed for a different style of chalice, font, lance, robes and pillars. When asked if designing the flexible elements a certain way changed the energy experienced while seated on the altar, she said it did not.[95] She makes a distinction between intention and performance when she said:

> The kind of things we changed were: Instead of a font we had a *tsukubai*, which is a kneeling basin. It doesn't say how high the font is so this was something that was on the floor. It was something you would do before a tea ceremony. It was a classic Zen thing. It was a lowering of the ego to get down and do the cleansing. There were things like that that we changed and the whole approach and attitude changed, but none of the steps. Some of the look of the equipment was different. Our chalice was the teacup that you use for "god-tea," the first tea of the year. In Japanese tea ceremonies, you do one where the cup is elevated on a platform. It's the tea you would offer the gods, or the emperor, or high nobility. So it was the right cup and it was the right shape, but it had a very different look and feel. It all had meaning to it but it was nothing that we changed … The actual feel of the whole ritual and the sense in the room, which is something the Priestess is quite in touch with, was more internalized and meditative. The intent was the same and therefore, the result. At least for us [the officers] it was the same, but the whole feel in performing the ritual seemed completely different.[96]

Differences in location seemed somewhat important since they all mentioned multiple venues such as living rooms, warehouses, garages, and retail space, and two mentioned the limitations of temporary Mass equipment which must fit in a vehicle. However, the location differences were brought up more often when talking about first

[95] NLPs, recorded interview by phone D02, March 21, 2014.

[96] Ibid.

seeing the Mass than when talking about officiating the Mass. All the interviewees stressed that the quality of the Mass performance was due more to the officers' preparation and intention than in the location, furnishings or equipment itself. When she responded to a question about whether she first saw the Mass in a formal temple space, NLPs explained that until recently the Mass was usually performed in privately-owned spaces:

> The Masses we attended were all in living rooms as U.S. Grand Lodge didn't start emphasizing holding events in detached, public locations until the late '90s – more than ten years later. The first truly public space in Southern California was rented by Star Sapphire Lodge in late 2000, so for the first twenty years of our OTO experience, *all* the Masses in Southern California were on private property – either in living rooms or in more permanent converted garages. In some ways living rooms can enhance the Mass experience: They are more intimate, and the focus must be on the ritual itself rather than the temple or funding the temple.[97]

When asked if the ritual works for everyone, assuming that the liturgy instructions are followed and the lines are delivered correctly, most of the interviewees stressed that it does work but that training and practice are essential for a "good Mass." When asked what qualities make a better Priest if two Priests are equivalent in training and practice, EPt said:

> Well, there are a number of reasons. For one, he would have more attraction to the Priestess, and the Priestess … more mutual attraction between the couple, right? … The other reason would be that he would be more of a natural dramatist than the other one because this is a dramatic ritual so you need to be an actor as well as a magician, which *is* a magician. An actor and a magician are the same thing … If you are a magician, if you are a really good magician, really spiritually pure and really actively doing your practices … [But] if you're not a bit of a ham, you're not going to do a Mass as good as me, because I'm doing all that stuff plus I'm a bit of ham. And I'm very aware of my audience, I want to

[97] NLPs, email follow-up, August 10, 2014.

> throw my arms up high, not only because it gives me a feeling of power but because I know my back is turned and people will see it and go, whoa, you know? I want that enthusiasm and response from the congregation.[98]

Another Priest, BPt, agreed that the Mass performance was a dramatic ritual but noted that it differed from a play in that the purpose of the Mass is to invoke divine energy and cause a spiritual transformation in the officers and in the congregants. Although good actors may also channel energy, the officers in the Mass identify with their characters at a deeper level:

> There are certain actors that are out there that when they're delivering their role, or they're delivering a specific part in a movie or a scene, that they really, really place themselves into that character and become a medium for that energy, whether it's joy or sadness, or drama or comedy. It's like channeling that energy makes it an effective performance, whether it's ritual or big screen. I think being a performer is having the ability to channel that energy and to being a conduit to the energy you're trying to project, regardless of whatever it is … I would consider the Gnostic Mass being something like a dramatic ritual. Yes, there's the interplay of energies that are happening within the team but the team is also embodying specific characters in this play, and as an audience, or as the congregation, when you see these characters in motion, it kind of … depending on the person … but it kind of resonates with the congregant as well, seeing this interplay between the positive and the negative, the male and the female, to where it can bring a sort of spiritual realization, or it can bring a sense of magic, to the congregant by just watching. But I think what separates it from the play is that the way that the characters, the team is identifying with what they are saying … I really think that there are certain lines and words and invocations that kind of stimulate the universal archetype in people's unconscious to where it does tap into a deeper part of your brain, into your psyche, to where it starts moving things in ways that a normal play at a playhouse kind of wouldn't. Maybe it's because of the fact that this play is a little bit more intense in its portraying divinity and the divine essence.[99]

LPt pointed out that the role of the Priestess and Priest is service to the congregation. While the authority to be a Priest is a like a "contract" or "social

[98] EPt, recorded interview in person A01, November 2, 2013.

[99] BPt, recorded interview by phone E02, August 2, 2014.

agreement" between the Priest and the officers and congregation, a successful performance of the Mass depends on focus, concentration, ability and momentum rather than consensus alone:

> Ultimately, the Priestess, if we're looking at the Priestess role from the standpoint of the Priest or of the congregant, the Priestess' role is service, right? The Priest's role is service. We're all here to serve the congregation. Right? So, regardless of what, if anything, is in the mind of the Priest or Priestess, if the idea is that they're going to serve, that they're here to serve in an office, it's not about them. It's about the office itself and it's about the impact on the congregants' consciousness that occurred when they viewed this ritual. So it is a performance … To me, the authority to be a Priest comes from my Priestess, comes from primarily from her, she's the first one that I look to, and then from there down the chain, from the Deacon, from the Children, from the congregants. Because if you guys don't look at me as the Priest, then I am not the Priest, you know? It's really that simple. A role is something that you play for others. When there's no one around, there's no role. Right? It totally is social … I don't think at the level of consciousness that the Priest is representing at the beginning of ritual, I don't think you can say that for sure whether there's a god or not, whether there's something or not. We're going to do an inquiry to see if this is what it is, and we're going to walk, we're going to move forward as if it were true but we don't know yet … To me, the whole thing is that you're working up to this thing that may or may not be successful. And it depends on your focus, your concentration, it depends on your ability to do the ritual, it depends on the momentum that you bring up. It's almost like leaping across a cliff, you know? You run as fast as you can, and then you jump, and you're in the air. You either make it or you don't.[100]

Finally, one might ask: What happens when the Mass is performed well?[101] What is the effect of a transformative ritual? How do they know something has happened? When asked whether the Gnostic Mass ritual was an attempt to raise the material, the

[100] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014.

[101] Note that while I often used the phrase "When you perform the Mass …?" in my questions, the interviewees would often respond with "When I officiate the Mass …" or "When I do the Mass …" rather than use *perform*.

physical or the profane to sacred status, EPt agreed but suggested that it was really a change of consciousness:

> I prefer to think that in terms of what happens to the Priest – and, by definition, the Priestess – as apotheosis, for the time being. Afterwards you better stick a token in the subway or you'll get arrested … That's the whole point of the Mass. I mean, what is the line? "For as much as meat and drink transmuted in spiritual substance I believe in the miracle of the Mass." The whole idea is to bring the physical into the spiritual … I think we really expect to have a radical change of consciousness during the Mass. I think we really expect to have something else happen. And if it doesn't happen then we think we've failed in the Mass … You know that it happens because you're blown out of your socks … But I think what happens is the separation between the individual and the Priestess, the distance between them becomes narrower over time. In other words, [she] incorporates in herself a lot of things. Even today, while she's sitting at home reading a magazine, she's a different person before she came into the order, or before she started doing the Mass … She has become a higher being …[102]

Agreeing with EPs that the ability to perform well in the Mass is – at least in part – due to previous efforts such as preparation, practice or experience prior to performance, LPt explained that saying "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods," is not only an announcement of experience but a command of will:

> My knowledge, my gnosis, of it working is kind of like the idea of … We're talking above the level of conceptual space, we're talking experientially which is why language can fail … But if I slap you across the face, you know that it happened, right? Now right after it happens, you don't know whether it happened or not, because it could be a hallucination. It could be a false memory. So right before it's going to happen, it's totally conceptual, and right after it happens, it's totally conceptual. But in that very moment of being slapped in the face, it's not conceptual. It's entirely experiential and there's no intellectual crap attached to it … It's a slap in the face, and then it's over. And then you can kind of start to do as a good detective does: Over the years of practicing, you can start to go, wow, since I've been practicing the Mass, these are the effects, these are some of the effects in my life that I noticed. You see these effects. Now these effects may or may not be tied to the

[102] EPt, recorded interview in person A01, November 2, 2013.

Mass, but I can start to say the Mass is one of these variables in my life so it must have some bearing on these effects I'm experiencing. Right? And that's when the self-knowledge stuff comes into play, you know, looking into your life and being aware of those areas and the components of what makes you, you.

But I think if you're looking for some kind of, like, this is how we know it works, I think that's going to be very difficult to pin down because it is very experiential and non-conceptual. And we symbolize it in a ritual because ritual is all about symbol, right? So we conceptualize it, we symbolize it, by saying, "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods", and all sorts of stuff. It's really much more subtle than that … The reason for me saying "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods" is not because I ate a little piece of cake. It's symbolically that and that's great but I'm saying it because I want to say it. And it's true because I said so. So that's kind of the answer: How do I know it worked? Because I said it did.[103]

[103] LPt, recorded interview by phone D01, February 27, 2014. Paragraph spacing added for legibility.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

The Perfect and the Perfect are one Perfect and not two; nay, are none!
Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law*

Solving a Mystery: Myself as Participant

I find it difficult to put myself into my research; perhaps because I am a trained librarian or perhaps because I know enough of both esoterica and academia to guess at the depth of the unknown. Like many other participant researchers, I have come to a fork in the road in which research into the areas which interest me requires a deeper personal investment than simply reviewing scholarly sources and analyzing data. The opportunity for this research, and the continued generosity and support for the project, was due in large part to the personal recommendations of two people – the one I consider a mentor and the other is a longtime friend of his. While this circumstance has given me access to the members, it has also encouraged me to continuously reexamine my perceptions in order to try to present a fair, complete and authentic view of the Gnostic Mass. As an academic, one may choose to study an event, a practice or a community from the perspective of an observer, speculating on history and motivation, comfortable in the distance between people and published outcome. However, although I am not a Thelemite, I am a citizen in the shared world of esotericism, ritual and initiation. Common interests and vocabulary not only made it possible to begin to comprehend the Gnostic Mass, they also strongly influenced my decision to engage deeply with the members and the work. My research therefore asks questions about gender and performance from the perspective of gnosis and transformation. While some insights I

gained are not easily conveyed in print, they did contribute significantly to my understanding as a companion on the road. For this also, I am grateful.

Before I first saw the Gnostic Mass, I had a confused jumble of ideas about it. I knew several O.T.O. members in the late 1990s, most whom are no longer involved or do not live locally. They adored Crowley and his books, but rarely spoke about the Gnostic Mass. I thought vaguely that it was like the Catholic Mass, but with a naked woman on the altar called Babalon and communion cakes made with body fluids. Despite my experience with a variety of New Age practices, including channeling, my childhood Catholicism insisted that this was in the same category as Ouija boards and talking to the dead – simply dangerous. Even so, my studies progressed and eventually I opened a metaphysical bookstore which introduced me to a much broader spectrum of practitioners: Mystics, witches, occultists, shamans, healers, mediums, and devotees of many different gods and goddesses. In the bookstore, I had a few of Crowley's books available, but only the Thoth Tarot deck was requested. Even among the esoteric orders – formalized initiatory groups such as Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn – the O.T.O. seemed to be considered a special-interest group and I found it fairly easy to study material written by members of these other orders without encountering Crowley in any detail. Gradually, hints here and there began to suggest that there was something significant about his work that not only stood the test of time but held up under the public censure of his notorious lifestyle. People I respected would insist that he was brilliant. Academics wrote articles about his influence in Western Esotericism which found their way into journals or anthologies about

Gnosticism or Hermeticism. Using a class assignment as an opportunity, I picked up my courage and contacted the local lodge about observing the Mass.

When I first went to see the Gnostic Mass, I was part of a group of five visitors who met at a nearby restaurant for a "meet and greet." As the greeter said, this was to make sure none of us were psychotic or on drugs before they disclosed the location of the Mass – an excellent plan, I thought. The greeter and the other four visitors were men, but perhaps because they looked relatively normal and were friendly, I felt comfortable with them immediately. When asked what our interest in the Gnostic Mass was, I was the only one there specifically for the ritual. The others had already read some of Crowley's books and were going to the Gnostic Mass as a way to check out the local O.T.O. lodge. The greeter approved us and we all reconvened at the temple. We waited outside while the officers got ready, and then the Deacon came out and told us what we could expect. We filed in quietly and sat in the dimly-lit temple. There were seven congregants and I was the only woman (other than the Priestess). There were no Children at this first Mass, a circumstance I later discovered was unusual. The ritual began and was confidently and calmly performed. There were some gestures and foot positions which I did not feel comfortable doing, so I did not do them.

When the veil was opened, I was truly surprised, even though by that point I knew the Priestess would be naked. The man next to me literally flinched and looked down. I found that I could not listen and look at the same time, and I was somewhat distracted by the request that I read the women's refrain after the Anthem. It was strange to read aloud in a ritual setting material which I had never read before and to have six men respond. The words seemed to echo in my head, which was curious, but I suspect I may have

actually sounded like a robot since the men sounded a little puzzled. We walked up to the altar to take a cup of wine and a cake from trays on pillars, passing behind the Priest, who stood right in front of the Priestess. I wanted to turn my head and look at her face, but I felt a strong urge to keep moving. I came back around to my seat and, following the example of the others, ate and drank quickly. The consistency and flavor of the Cakes was somewhat similar to a Fig Newton, or perhaps gingerbread. Mimicking the others, I crossed my arms over my chest and said, "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods." I did not find this particularly difficult since I have multiple ways of interpreting "the Gods," but that first time, I spontaneously thought of the astrological archons.[1] After the communion, the ritual ended very rapidly, which seemed jarring to me considering that we had just said that we were reflective of divinity. Outside, we stayed quiet and kept to ourselves. After we came back in, the officers were dressed in casual clothes and seemed happy and calm. I heard the Priestess repeat several times to a congregant "it's not me," which I took at the time to mean that she was not able or willing to confirm a perception or feeling that happened during the Mass. The other visitors spoke to the officers briefly and left quickly. I have only seen one of those visitors again; not only did he join within the past year, I have also seen him perform as Deacon.

Since then, I have seen the Mass eight more times, and viewed several video performances available online. Some things have remained the same: I am still reluctant to perform some of the gestures and I still find it hard to switch back and forth between looking, listening and speaking. I do not say the Creed because it appears to be a

[1] These entities are the archetypal energies of the planets related to the emanations of creation found in Gnosticism and in the Kabbalah.

statement of faith, but, since a member told me that it also acts as purification or absolution, I have tried to be more attentive to my frame of mind before the ritual starts. Each time I see the Gnostic Mass, the emphasis changes but my favorite part is still the Anthem. At one Mass when many women were present, the refrain was robust and joyous, like a dance between the women and the men. The pacing of the communion and the end of the ritual still seems rushed to me, and I often wish there were music or meditation for a while to allow time for introspection. The congregants are consistently respectful, calm and friendly. The sense of community among the members and guests of the lodge is strong and they seem genuinely glad to see each other.

Despite the fact that the Mass is performed similarly each time and all the teams I saw were proficient, sympathetic connection may be in the eye of the beholder. Practice is clearly important, but the most evocative Mass I saw was the newest team: The Priestess seemed to be sweet, motherly, amused, and vast simultaneously, and the Priest seemed intensely focused and clearly believed he was serving a higher purpose. Afterwards, she gave me a rose (a common practice in this lodge) and I was so giddy, I almost wrecked my car on the way home. So, it seems that something happened, but what? One Priestess performed three times in different states of dress – clothed, partially draped, and naked – and the Priest behaved differently each time; when she was naked, he seemed to stumble and his words were quiet with awe and devotion. Another pair I saw were well-rehearsed but it was only when the Priest was consecrating the elements that I saw him step into his role and at that moment he was the strongest and purest of the Priests I saw. The Mass performance was always sincere and often it was beautiful. In eight out of nine Masses, there were significantly more men than women, and many of

the women present were wives or girlfriends of the men present. It would be sad, I think, to see this ritual over and over, to want to perform it as a Priestess or a Priest, but to be unable to find a partner who is not only competent in the practical sense but who could also fulfill the possibility of transformation.

An important part of this research for me has been to try to understand what is meant by the phrase "the Gnostic Mass works." In one sense, the Gnostic Mass is a public performance of a standardized ritual in which the words, gestures and clothing reinforce a shared meaning. A good performance is one in which the officers are well-rehearsed and the team is comfortable and proficient with the task of reproducing the ritual exactly as written. In another sense, however, the ritual is the enactment of an initiatory process which, when well-performed, results in the transformation of the officers and of the congregants, even if only temporarily. A good performance in the second sense is one in which energy is raised, channeled, directed and shared. The Mass team is compatible when they function together as a single body with a single intention – to bless the congregation so that they also may accomplish their True Will, or the reunion of the finite with the infinite, which is the Great Work.[2] In my experience, the performance was always well-rehearsed and sincere, and at moments, sublime. For me, however, it has not been in-person participation in the ritual but interaction with the members during the interviews and the effort to understand the Gnostic Mass in relation to *The Book of the Law* which has truly been transformative.

[2] James Wasserman and Nancy Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast: A Performance Commentary on the Gnostic Mass*, revised 3rd ed.(n.l: Sekmet Books, 2013), 118.

Patterns in the Local Lodge: Channeling, Enthusiasm and Energy

Several patterns emerged during the interviews which seem to relate to three words which came up frequently in conversations about the role of the Priestess. "Channeling" is used by both Priestesses and Priests for the activity of the Priestess, which appears to mean a conscious flow of energy made possible by deliberate containment and release. Channeling in this case does not mean possession in the sense of abdicating control to another being, or mediumship in the sense of speaking on behalf of a noncorporal being or the dead. "Enthusiasm" is used primarily by the Priests for the Priest's role and appears to mean the rising force generated through attraction to the Priestess as a woman or as the feminine, or, in the case of the local Bishop-Priest, to the Holy Spirit as a desired divine unity. "Energy" appears to be the universal substance which causes change according to will, and in a gendered state seems to correspond to either Love (as accepting, giving, nurturing and feminine) or Life (as acting, directing, fertilizing and masculine). Although there were some exceptions, there are strong gender attributions to "channeling," "enthusiasm," and "energy."

In general, the local lodge members seem to have compatible concepts about the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass. The three local Priestesses tended to speak about their experiences as Priestess in terms of activity and energy rather than in terms of image or worship. All three agreed that while naming the energies channeled by the Priestess was acceptable, none of them actually relied very strongly on either the names or the myths of goddesses to describe their own experiences. Further, they frequently referred to their role as channeling or "bringing through" energy rather than embodying or representing a divinity. All three also strongly rejected the idea that they were

specifically channeling a goddess for devotional purposes and, while they recognized that some congregants may feel the urge to act devotionally, they did not think that the Mass was or should be a goddess-worship ritual. Interestingly, when two of the three Priests discussed what happens in the ritual, they moved back and forth between describing the Priestess as woman, as wife, as a person, and as a divine being.[3] They were willing to talk about what part of their experience of the Priestess related to goddess names or myths, but ultimately claimed that the divine feminine was infinite and not limited to a particular goddess. Further, these Priests' responses suggested that naming the goddess focused the ritual on aspects of the feminine without replacing the identity of the woman herself, evidence that the Priests thought the activity of the Priestess was channeling energy rather than channeling a deity (in the sense of possession or mediumship).

The ability to be a Priestess may be "natural" to a woman, but the authority to be the Priestess in the Gnostic Mass comes from the acknowledgement by the congregation before the invocation. The Priestess then acts with this authority to raise the Priest and it is after the consecrations of both the Priest and the Priestess that both Nuit and Hadit are invoked. The word "invocation" is used several times to mean "calling" or making present certain energies which are associated with particular god-names. However, both the Priestesses and the Priests seemed willing to describe invocation as the method while also maintaining that the experience itself is not defined by it, as if the names were convenient labels for an energy which was ultimately impersonal and infinite. Although two Priests associated channeling with their own performances as Hadit, that use of

[3] One of these two Priests is not married and works with a close friend so it is particularly interesting that he described the Priestess as an "alchemical wife."

"channeling" seemed particular to the type of question asked. One Priest mentioned that performing well, even as a film actor, involves channeling the emotional energy of the part, being a conduit for the energy to be projected. He said that in a dramatic ritual this sense of projective emotional channeling is heightened when the performers are portraying divinity. Another Priest described the role of the Priestess and the Priest as "controlled possession," an idea related to channeling but was used in response to a question asking him whether the connection was like a possession. A Priest was more likely to refer to the invocation of Hadit and the role of the Priest from the perspective of being a magician than being a channeler, a choice which emphasizes the willful projection of energy rather than flow or receptivity. Even the serpentine movement of the Priestess before invocation might be described by some as channeling. In the performance guide, *To Perfect This Feast*, the Priestess is urged to channel energy rather than project it during her walk:

> *Note to Priestess:* Regardless of what you want to project when you walk into the Temple – the attitude you seek to convey; what you think you will feel like when you get there; how you will walk; what your voice will sound like when you speak – you must drop all preconceptions when you walk through the door. Be an open conduit and let the energy channel through you.[4]

According to the Priestesses, the role of the Priestess is not passive in the sense of being empty or doing nothing, but is one of active control – focused, grounding, filtering, selective, invulnerable, strong, stable and empowered. The position the Priestess holds with her arms up is sometimes called a "nourishing pose," which while visually implying openness and offering, is in fact physically difficult, suggesting that maintaining an

[4] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 60.

internal state of openness involves significant external control.[5] As several of the Priestesses mentioned, the Priestess has a sword and she is both forceful and directive when she circles the temple and raises the Priest. Her path around the floor is described as serpentine, associated with rising energy and sexuality. As soon as she completes her circuits, the Priestess moves swiftly to the tomb and, using her sword, draws back the tomb veil. She is enthusiastic when she consecrates the elements, kneeling and throwing up her arms. She consecrates and robes the man, making him a Priest. Kneeling she strokes the lance, perhaps transferring the enthusiasm of her own raised energy. All the Priestesses responded to questions about the possible passivity of the role of the Priestess by pointing out that she is "girt with a sword" and able to raise energy on her own at the start of Mass. As Nuit she calls to Hadit from behind the veil. Her voice is eager and joyful and her speech is rapid with short sentences punctuated with exclamation points. However, although the Priestess' activity and energy might be associated with power or sexuality, none of the Priestesses or Priests used *enthusiastic/enthusiasm* for the Priestess' energetic acts.

While channeling is more strongly associated with the role of the Priestess, enthusiasm is more strongly associated with the role of the Priest. Enthusiasm is an inner reaction to external stimuli which must be renewed and maintained through the Priest's vision, movement and speech. While enthusiasm is similar to sexual excitement, it is also ardor, fervor or passion for union with the Other, whether that is the feminine or the divine. The Priests frequently use terms which express physical or energetic attraction and as Hadit they are associated with the force of Life, or the drive to experience, to

[5] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast,* 84.

possess and to conquer. The Priest's speech and movements are often swift, loud and exaggerated in order to visually express that force to the congregation and to maintain momentum. His enthusiasm is due to the mutual bond with the Priestess, a bond which might be physical, emotional or spiritual; nonetheless, according to the local lodge members, it is her "femininity" which invokes his "masculine" response. That this enthusiasm is most often a male response can be seen in EPt's comments in which he describes himself as enthusiastic until empty of anything but the desire for union, or apotheosis, and then he becomes female, or "as a woman … wanted to be filled." In other words, seeking union is masculine and indwelling is feminine. However, in their description of the Priest, Helena and Tau Apiryon refer to a quote by Crowley which suggests that the Priest might claim both enthusiasm and indwelling, or masculinity and femininity:

> For it seemth (as I dream) that the priest is to the Most High God as is a woman to her lover, that his raiment and apparel are even as the silks and fine linens and laces of a courtesan, which she adorns herself withal, that she may make her lover mad with love. And the incense? Oh a surety it is so. Then he, being made God by the passion of God that floodeth him, transmitteth God to bread and wine, transmuteth them again to God. Then eateth and drinketh he that God, even (again) as a woman receiveth of the lover the fluid and solid substance of his being; and thus being made God once more, ex infero [*sic*], he transmitteth upward that godhead by the transmutation of those received Elements into strength of body and spirit exulting poureth out its new divinity in praise and thanksgiving to the All-Father. I would also that ye take note how bread and wine be adorned for the priest, in golden paten and chased chalice.[6]

The local lodge members were united in claiming that the energy of the Mass is the result of the procreative union of feminine and masculine energy. While the energy

[6] Aleister Crowley, "Not the Life and Adventures of Sir Roger Bloxam," (source not given), quoted in Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 6-7.

that the Priestess and the Priest bring to the Mass is gendered, the energy of the result of their union, and the Mass itself, is not necessarily gendered. Two of the Priestesses describe the Mass as "working" because the roles of the Priestess and the Priest are based on the procreative biology of a man and a woman. One of the bishops states that the Gnostic Mass is a celebration of the reunion of two who were once an infinite One, but were "divided for love's sake, for the chance of union."[7] The result of the heterosexual union of gendered energy is a union of opposites in which all creation is possible, an androgyne ("male-female") who is sometimes represented as a child and sometimes as a hybrid being. However, the local group also suggests that both intentional performance and inclusion of the congregants require recognition of meaning: The gendered bodies of the Priestess and the Priest seem to indicate the genders of the archetypal energies, the heterosexual symbolism in the ritual seems to indicate the method of union. Several Priests point out that the performance of this ritual is done as a service, not for the gods, but for the congregants, who are inspired by the archetypal images in the ritual and by the energetic catalyst of the communion and/or the blessing.[8] These two possible interpretations of gender recognition may perhaps be suggested by a subtle difference between *invoking* and *evoking* in which the officers invoke the energy or authority of

[7] *Liber AL* I:29.

[8] It seems possible that the energetic catalyst (or leaven) which is transferred to the congregation may be the communion rather than the blessing because the communion is required for all congregants and requires ritual acceptance and acknowledgement, whereas the blessing is received without liturgical response; however, the local lodge members indicated several times that the blessing is the release of the mass energy to the congregation.

deity with or without visual recognition but evoke the awareness or understanding of the congregation through visual recognition.[9]

The Priestess and the Priest may also be transformed by union, perhaps permanently. This transformation may be of two types: There may be a gradual change in consciousness as their personal energy aligns with their service and/or there may be an outward change in their lives as they, like the congregants, work to understand their own wills. Since the union of the gendered Nuit and Hadit as Love and Life is the purpose of the Mass and their union is demonstrated by heterosexual symbols and speech in the liturgy, the roles of the Priestess and the Priest necessarily reflect gender polarity in order to make this union visible to the congregants. However, there is some suggestion in *The Book of the Law* that this perfect union is the union of two perfected people rather than simply two complementary genders joined: "For pure will, unassuaged of purpose, delivered from the lust of result, is every way perfect. The Perfect and the Perfect are one Perfect and not two; nay, are none!"[10] Perhaps the two symbols of androgyny – child and hybrid – in the Gnostic Mass can be explained by this rather alchemical idea that a permanent unity, or dissolution, is achieved through the union of two stars, who are themselves perfected through union. That dissolution, and not hybridity, may be the ultimate intention in *The Book of the Law* is suggested by a fuller quote:

> Then the Priest answered & said unto the Queen of Space, kissing her lovely brows, and the dew of her light bathing his whole body in a sweet-smelling perfume of sweat: O Nuit, continuous one of Heaven, let it be ever thus; that men speak not of Thee as One but as None; and let them

[9] To take this further, it is possible that these two recognitions might reflect a gnosis of being or a gnosis of perceiving, which perhaps might be associated with the officers and the congregation, respectively.

[10] *Liber AL* I:44-45.

> speak not of thee at all, since thou art continuous! None, breathed the light, faint & Faery, of the stars and two. For I am divided for love's sake, for the chance of union. This is the creation of the world, that the pain of dissolution is as nothing, and the joy of dissolution all.[11]

Gender and the Role of the Feminine: Fieldwork Comparisons

When compared to the statements of other Priestesses and Priests about the role of gender and the feminine in the Gnostic Mass given in Chapter Two, the local lodge members are somewhat more conservative than the other sources when it comes to gender roles. Three related topics highlight this tendency: support for the heterosexual formula, performance of the ritual as written by Crowley, and resistance to innovations such as goddess-worship and gender-alternative public Masses. Nonetheless, there also seems to be a strong belief in the dignity of human beings who can perfect themselves and become godlike. The "exaltation of man and woman" is emphasized over the personalities or images of deity, resulting in a lodge focus on training, practice, committed teams, and controlled performance. The more frequent use of the terms *magic/magician* rather than *gnosis/gnostic*, *Kabbalah*, or even *Tantra*, in their responses about how the Mass works seems to indicate that they may perceive themselves as "trained professionals" who creatively combine elements rather than mystically merge with them. For the local lodge, transformation through union seems to be the result of effort rather than devotion or revelation, although descriptions of the state of union itself seem to refer to mystical terminology such as *indwelling*, *gnosis* and *apotheosis*.

[11] *Liber AL* I:27-30. Further research would be necessary to understand the cosmogonies which influence the Gnostic Mass, each which implies a different interpretation of the "child" of the Mass and the symbols which represent it: Nuit, Hadit and Ra-Hoor-Khuit; the Aeons Isis, Osiris and Horus; and Chaos, Babalon and Baphomet of the Creed. Note that three states of being are indicated by "none," "of the stars," and "two."

From the related online and text resources, Soror Bitshtar contends that one of the justifications for gender polarity is the belief that "women are naturally initiated" through their body experiences of menarche or childbirth, a statement made also by one of the local members. While this seems to validate "female mysteries" of blood and fertility, it may also disenfranchise the menopausal or infertile woman. Further, if women do not need initiation, they might be seen primarily as receptive mediums rather than active magicians. Brandy Williams emphasizes that though the role of the Priestess may be balanced in some respects with the role of the Priest, it is not equal since the Priestess largely supports the activity of the Priest. Additionally, in the Mass she described, Williams acts as medium for the goddess, sometimes hearing Nuit within and encouraging devotional practices. These two related perceptions – that the role of the Priestess is primarily supportive rather than active and that the Mass has aspects of goddess-worship and mediumship – are not found in the responses of the local Priestesses. Instead, the local Priestesses seem to feel the Priestess is an active partner in her capacity to contain and focus energy, and strongly reject goddess-worship in the Mass. Since the local lodge members emphasize femininity and channeling, but not goddess-worship, this seems to indicate that they feel that women are easily conduits for feminine energy without a need for a personified indwelling (i.e., a deity), precisely because as women they are inherently and actively feminine. This sense of active femininity can also be seen in the image of the warrior Priestess. Two of the local Priestesses seem to share Soror LA's opinion that while the Priestess (and the Thelemic woman) is natural, fertile, feminine, and passive in relation to the Priest, she is also a warrior Priestess "girt with a sword" who owns her sexuality and defends her choices.

In Kowalchyk's fieldwork, the majority of O.T.O. members she interviewed described their search for a spiritual path as a "natural progression" in which most had read Crowley and knew of the order before they saw the Gnostic Mass.[12] However, she notes that the three women she interviewed who were brought to the Mass by boyfriends did not immediately join the O.T.O. and suggested it was because they were not the primary seekers.[13] In the local lodge, one of three Priestesses described her steps in the O.T.O. as part of a long term search and she joined the O.T.O. on her own after seeing a Gnostic Mass held by her landlord. The two other local Priestesses had little previous knowledge before they went to a Mass and they later joined with a boyfriend and a fiancé, respectively, and one Priestess thought it might be more common for women to join with emotional partners. Regardless, from observation of the local lodge it appears that women who do join as part of a pair or quickly find a partner may move very rapidly into the Priestess role. Perhaps women who pair with Priests early or who are paired with an emotional partner are more likely to see the Priestess role as supportive or complementary. More research should be done to understand the role of early pairing in the development of the Priestess' interpretation of the Mass. In the local lodge, both the Priestesses and the Priests are influenced by the local bishops who provide intensive training and instruction, so similarities between the Priestess and the Priest of a pair may be due to their common training background rather than the influence of the Priest.

[12] Claudia Kowalchyk, "A Study of Two 'Deviant' Religious Groups: The Assemblies of God and the Ordo Templi Orientis" (PhD Diss., New York University, 1994), 111, 140.

[13] Ibid., 137.

While some of Kowalchyk's interviewees mentioned things they would change, such as sexist language or the lack of women in the list of Saints, the local members more strongly supported preserving the ritual as written by Crowley.[14] Gender-alternative Masses (same-sex, transposed, or transgender) were considered acceptable in private settings or in unofficial rituals but were not preferred by any of the local members and were not supported as public Gnostic Mass rituals. This seems to be a more conservative position than found in the Hedenborg-White fieldwork, in which two interviewees had officiated in gender-alternative roles several times in private Masses.[15] However, two Hedenborg-White interviewees argued against gender-alternative roles in order to preserve the formula of "the magical child created through the annihilation of opposites" and another two more were open to exploring gender-alternative Masses but ambivalent about efficacy.[16] Even the two who had participated several times in gender-alternative Masses suggested that gender roles which conform to physical sex clarify the symbolism of the Mass for congregants.[17] Curiously, when asked why some people wanted to officiate in gender-alternative Masses, two local lodge members suggested that it was mostly men who wanted to be Priestesses rather than women wanting to be Priests, while several of Hedenborg-White's interviewees suggested that it was more common for

[14] Ibid., 161-165.

[15] Manon Hedenborg-White, "To Him the Winged Secret Flame, To Her the Stooping Starlight: The Social Construction of Gender in Contemporary Ordo Templi Orientis." MA Thesis (Stockholm University, 2013), 61.

[16] Ibid., 63.

[17] Ibid., 61.

women to be Priests than for men to be Priestesses in gender-alternative Masses.[18] One of her interviewees pointed out that the power differential made the Priest role attractive to women, while another interviewee thought that surrendering control would make it difficult for men to be Priestesses.[19] The local lodge members tended to think that the desire for gender-alternative Masses was not about power but about personal expression and that it was mostly transgender men who were interested in being the Priestess. Local members differentiated sexual orientation from gender performativity but linked gender with biological factors such as birth sex and DNA. Although the local members thought that the private gender-alternative Masses are acceptable as magical practice, they are considered to be different rituals and not the Gnostic Mass as written by Crowley.

Gendered Image and the Sacred Gaze

When asked how divinity is imaged, Kowalchyk's interviewees suggested that the divine could be represented by any image including a reflection, while others said that only lesser gods could be given an image since the supreme deity was unknowable and transcendent.[20] One male interviewee suggested that the images of the gods were somewhat flexible because they included nonanthropomorphic images from ritual such as "stars in the night sky" or "flaming snake," personal interpretations such as Horus as a boy or a girl with a hawk head, and the ability to perceive the divine in the people around them.[21] In the local lodge, a Priest who discussed the Priestess as image suggested that

[18] Ibid., 62.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Kowalchyk, "A Study of Two," 213.

[21] Ibid., 215.

since recognition of the archetype of Nuit or Babalon is important to the efficacy the Mass, the Priestess should not be overweight, underweight, in a wheelchair, tattooed or a "mouth-breather."[22] On the other hand, this same Priest spoke eloquently about the representation of the feminine as woman, wife, individual, Babalon or Nuit, implying perhaps that while femininity is a more inclusive category and can be broadly interpreted, the specific goddesses Nuit and Babalon have certain standardized visual qualities that indicate their "god-status." This simultaneous flexibility and inflexibility about representative images appears to depend on whether these images have accepted god-names, mythos and visual history. Babalon and Nuit may have strong image associations precisely because they have been linked to mythological figures of antiquity. Further research might investigate how these god-forms are imagined to look, what sources these characteristics derive from and to what extent the Priestess of the Gnostic Mass should look like those images. This question appears to be fundamental to the debate about gender-alternative Masses since, in addition to the claim that the Mass "works" because it is modelled on the reproductive union, it may also "work" as an imaginative stimulus for the Priest's enthusiasm and the congregants' participation when the Priestess models a particular and recognizable archetype of femininity.

While the Priests seem to focus somewhat more on the visual image of the feminine and on Nuit and Babalon as particular representations of the feminine, the Priestesses describe the feminine as experience, feeling or energy rather than an image. Attempts to determine if the Priestess creates an image for others or a correspondence for themselves through hair style, clothing, jewelry or makeup was met with little interest,

[22]Presumably, a "mouth-breather" is an unappealing, gross person.

eliciting silence, shrugs and offhand comments. The responses that were given seem to indicate they were following instructions from the liturgy, descriptive hints from *The Book of the Law,* or making spontaneous choices based on comfort or personal adornment. In any case, they do design their own robes and make a conscious choice to be clothed, partially clothed or naked when the altar veil is drawn aside. The Priestess is only required to be naked behind the veil during the invocation speeches and the responses, after which she may choose to rerobe before the veil opens. According to the performance guide used by the local members, the nudity of the Priestess has no bearing on the efficacy of the ritual: "There is no question that whether robed or unrobed, a qualified Priestess is equally capable of embodying and projecting the required erotic energy."[23] Of the two Priestesses who chose to be partially clothed, one took care to drape her robe so that the inner curve of the breasts was displayed and the other chose to wear only royal blue panties (matching her discarded robe). One Priestess brought her own altar cup, paten, censor and element bowls, which seemed to reinforce the Greco-Roman theme of her robe, suggesting that while having familiar altar tools may be important to concentration, creating a thematic setting also implies attention to the visual impact of ornamentation.

Although Brandy Williams describes officiating as Priestess in Gnostic Masses in which devotional practices including clairaudience were encouraged, the local Priestesses reject goddess-devotion as distracting to the energetic purpose of the Mass. In order to conserve and focus energy, the local Priestesses also do not look at or engage directly with the congregants at any point. One Priest said that the offices of the Priestess and the

[23] Wasserman and Wasserman, *To Perfect This Feast*, 83.

Priest are themselves service but although the authority to be an officer is a "contract" or "social agreement" between the officers and with the congregation, successful performance is about the impact on the consciousness of the congregation. The three local Priests seemed to suggest that impacting the congregation was the Priest's responsibility, which he fulfills by showing enthusiasm, by speaking parts which require congregant responses, by elevating and combining the elements, and by releasing the Mass energy in the blessing. The local Priestess' service to the congregation is in raising the Priest and then working with the Priest to raise and contain the Mass energy so that it can be powerfully released in the blessing. Thus, in this lodge, the image of the Priestess appears to be more strongly linked to the Priest's performance than to the congregation's participation.

Although the local Priestesses do not encourage devotional practices or overtly seek to define the experience of the congregants through image-construction, they still present themselves as an iconic image while seated on the altar. This iconification is emphasized by the liturgy when the Priest lifts her up with the words, "I, PRIEST and KING, take thee, Virgin pure without spot; I upraise thee, I lead thee to the East, I set thee upon the summit of the Earth."[24] From the perspective of the congregation, this placement of the Priestess on the altar transforms the Priestess from actor to object. She is a consecrated vessel and, in a real sense, the altar itself. Her consecration includes *The Book of the Law*, which she holds open on her chest with her hands positioned like a descending triangle, which links her body with the channeled mythos of Thelema. After

[24] *Liber XV*: "IV: Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil."

the invocation of Nuit and the drawing aside of the veil, the Priestess is a visible sign of the invoked presence. Although the invocation has specifically called for Nuit and the Priestess herself may perceive the energies as impersonally feminine, from the perspective of Thelemic philosophy, it seems that the visible form can only be Babalon since Nuit is infinite. The drawing back of the veil and the Priestess' nakedness demonstrate that the hidden sacred is now revealed and may be interacted with through the consummation of the elements. This image of the naked Priestess seated on the altar with her arms upraised is unique to the Gnostic Mass and is perhaps the most recognized of Thelemic iconography.

Regardless of what the Priestess may be feeling, thinking or intending, her image is now subject to the view, interpretation and memory of the congregants. This viewing is not simply looking but a concentrated and intimate stare which has been informed by the words and movements of the ritual. David Morgan calls this the "sacred gaze," a religious act of seeing in which the image, the viewer and seeing have spiritual context and meaning.[25] This spiritual context is explicitly accepted by the congregants when they repeat the Creed at the beginning of the ritual but it is also reinforced by the Priestess who holds *The Book of the Law* open on her chest and the Priest who consecrates her. It is given further meaning by the invocations and responses which result in the Priestess saying from behind the veil, "There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt," the revelation of Thelema, which is illustrated immediately after by the unveiling of the naked Priestess. The act of seeing a hidden truth is the transformative connection between belief and

[25] David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

practice, a comprehending which includes recognition, insight and reorientation. Morgan notes that religious images often act as both the boundaries of the sacred and the means of communication, often making the image a focus of offering or petition.[26] He claims that images are always seen with the "eye of faith," in which the viewer participates interactively with the image, supplying whatever narration is needed to interpret it and assimilate it sympathetically.[27]

According to Diana L. Eck, this seeing of the hidden sacred made visible in an image is inherently an act of worship and blessing called *darshan*.[28] Although it might be said that to move imaginatively around the temple space with the Priestess and the Priest is a type of pilgrimage, seeing the sacred is not initiated by the congregant but by the sacred, which presents itself to be seen. Darshan is mutual; the sacred is not only seen but sees, acknowledges or knows the seer in such a way that mutual recognition and benefit is communicated.[29] In darshan, the sacred is accessible – that is, the infinite becomes finite – which results in intimacy and devotion. One local Priestess referred to the intimate gaze shared with her Priest as "the eyes of God." Nonetheless, the local Bishop-Priestess familiar with darshan practice contends that seeing the revealed Priestess in the Gnostic Mass is not darshan because there is no mutual gaze and no benefit conveyed directly. At most, the Priestess passes the energy of the Mass to the Priest who, after enclosing the Priestess behind the veil, turns and meets the eyes of the congregation as he

[26] Ibid., 54, 59.

[27] Ibid., 75.

[28] Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

[29] Ibid., 9.

transmits the blessing. The congregants may meet the eyes of the Priest but there are no official verbal or physical responses to the blessing. The Priest returns to the tomb immediately after, presumably to die after the completion of his life's work, while the Priestess remains hidden behind the veil. However, although what individual congregants expect from or perceive about the image of the Priestess is as yet unresearched, based on Brandy Williams' description and responses from the local lodge, it seems likely that darshan as a mutual sacred gaze is practiced in some Gnostic Mass performances within the broader and more commonly used term of "goddess-devotion."

Feminism and the Gendered Spectator

While the local Priestesses and Priests contend that the Gnostic Mass is not a type of goddess-worship, that assessment appears to be in the eye of the beholder. Regardless of the Priestess' intention or experience, the image once presented is the possession of the viewer, who interprets and remembers it within personal, social and ritual contexts. Donna Haraway points out that all vision is embodied in the sense that there is no neutral eye which can see impartially.[30] The viewer has a history, a location and a body of his/her own so the viewer can never be objective in the sense of being outside the transaction of cues and interpretation. There is also always an inequality of power in that a viewer can only make judgments about the sight object but cannot truly enter into the experience of the object. The viewer, or the subject, is not identical with the object, which is always the Other, unless that viewer is infinite.[31] The viewer must engage and interpret the object

[30] Donna Haraway, "The Persistence of Vision," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 283.

[31] Ibid., 289.

from a partial perspective. Feminism not only examines differences of perspective based on sex identity or gender role but also the perspectives of any position or orientation. Haraway suggests that to acknowledge the position of the viewer and his/her corresponding partial vision is to be responsible for enabling and/or constructing and to recognize objectivity as relational.[32] Some theorists may try to define specific perspectives such as "male" or "female" by contrasting them against an unmediated, ungendered, uncreated viewpoint, but if there is such a thing, it is transcendent and perhaps unknowable. Haraway argues for a more balanced consideration of voice and sight in which feminism is more broadly seen as revealing situated knowledge.[33] This emphasis on positioning can also provide a more balanced examination of other binaries, such as text and image, actor and audience, and magician and medium/channel. In gendered rituals, this new definition of feminism explores difference as an unavoidable but necessary function of interaction, but also validates choice of difference, constructed settings and the perspective of the viewer.

The changing focus of feminism from binaries of difference to spectrums of difference may perhaps be seen more clearly in feminist examinations of the male gaze in art and film. Feminist theory is moving beyond binary definitions of gender to include other perspectives such as race, class, body image, sexual identity, aesthetics, and cultural imperatives. Mary Devereaux illustrates the impact of positioning and location of the spectator, the object and the gaze that connects them in the area of aesthetics and art

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 292.

analysis.[34] As an example, she notes that feminist theories use the term "male gaze" to denote the way that male writers/directors, characters and spectators see women in Hollywood films. Feminism claims that not only is gender significant in forming expectation and perspective, but also that both men and women also see through the same lens which is male-dominated, or informed by patriarchal power, gendered language, and consumerism. The three types of gazes in film – the film-maker, the characters and the spectators – share assumptions and reinforce each other. Devereaux points out that through narrative action, the spectator is identified with the hero who exerts an active, controlling perspective over women who sing, dance, or undress before the possessive gaze of others.[35] There is an objectification of women's bodies as beautiful, nurturing, or inspiring which pushes their individuality and activity to the background, the result of which is that women are portrayed as dangerous, domesticated or fetishized.[36] While the woman may gaze back, she may not take control of the narrative action. Since the spectator identifies with the moving actor, the spectator shares in the observational assumptions of the actor, including the perspective that the narrative, other characters and cosmology revolves around the actor. Devereaux wonders: What do female spectators see when they look at women as objects? Does the male gaze function the same way if the spectator is not patriarchal or not heterosexual? She claims that the frontier of feminism is to discover the meaning of the spectator's experience in addition to the meaning of the

[34] Mary Devereaux, "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and the Gendered Spectator: The New Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 4 (Autumn, 1990):, http://www.jstor/stable/431571, 337.
[35] Ibid., 341.

[36] Ibid., 343.

text.[37] For Devereaux, feminism challenges the assumption that art is value-neutral as the representation of either a genderless divine form or a universal human experience.[38] She concludes that feminism ultimately calls for experimentation by creating "counter-cinema" which consciously chooses nonpatriarchal perspectives or by reading existing texts "against the grain" and moving the spectator's identification to other viewpoints within and outside of the narrative.[39]

While Devereaux's three gazes of the film-maker, the characters and the spectators seems to correspond to Crowley, the Mass officers, and the congregants in the Gnostic Mass, the actions and experiences of the Priestesses do not fully support such an interpretation. First, the three-gaze division implies that the narrative actor with whom the spectators identify is the same throughout the performance. In the Gnostic Mass, the Priestess greets and is acknowledged by the congregants as an actor and agent of change. She raises the energy of the temple and she raises the man from the tomb. She consecrates the man, initiating and empowering him as Priest. It is only when the Priest lifts up the Priestess and walks with her to the altar that the transference of perspective begins to occur. Not only does seating the Priestess immobilize her, but the other officers also switch their perspectives from assisting her to assisting the Priest. While the call of Nuit to her beloved reminds the congregants of the Priestess' presence and her effect on the Priest, the Deacon's response to the second invocation reinforces the personal narrative of the writer [Crowley]. The terse response from behind the veil to the third

[37] Ibid., 345.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 346.

invocation, “There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt” establishes the depersonalized and infinite voice in the minds of the congregants. Although the Priestess is then revealed as the naked feminine, frozen in an evocative pose of offering, her supportive movements and orgasmic whisper HRILIU remind the congregants of her presence as living partner rather than object. Further, her choices about nudity, ornamentation, eye contact, and the timing of movements can either accentuate or de-emphasize her own personality and interpretation so that she remains a contributing factor even when apparently a semi-static image. The local Priestesses’ descriptions of their experiences and feelings assert their control, power and independence, while also suggesting common expectations and perspectives among them. The Priests alternate between multiple archetypal descriptors of her continuously transforming image which interacts creatively with their moving perspectives, and personal descriptors which acknowledge the seated Priestess as a particular woman with personal qualities and contributions.

Secondly, Devereaux’s three-gaze division seems to imply that the congregants are a single entity which has a passively-absorbed identification with the Priest and a unified vision of the Priestess as object. However, the Gnostic Mass is a participatory ritual and the congregants not only stand, sit, gesture, speak, walk, eat and drink, but they also confirm their acceptance of the mythos behind the ritual by saying the Creed, completing the Law of Thelema phrases, and announcing, “There is no part of me that is not of the Gods.” Individual congregants can be informed or uninformed, hesitant or forceful, impassive or invested, clergy or laity, members or guests, or hold a variety of other perspectives which do not necessarily support a unified experience. Further, gender in the congregation may be balanced, divided and united in different ways which change

the perspective of the congregant throughout the Mass and between Masses. In the local lodge, the Deacon tries to balance the seating of the congregation by both gender and number. While the refrains are usually spoken by the congregation together, the Anthem refrains are done as alternating choruses of men and women. Although little research has been done on the perceptions and experiences of the congregants, the local Priestesses reacted to their first Gnostic Mass with curiosity, awe or admiration combined with rapid commitment to perform as a Priestess which suggests some degree of gender identification. Since O.T.O. leaders and Mass officers are more likely to participate in field research projects, it is important to note that other than the researchers, Psyche seems to be the only non-officer quoted in this thesis and she rejected the Mass as gender-limiting.[40] This suggests that the visitor who attends only once or a few times and who most likely does not identify with any of the "three gazes" (Crowley, the officers or the other congregants) evidences that the congregants do not necessarily share a passive identification with the Priest or a unified vision of the Priestess. Even though the liturgy refers to the congregants as "The People," which implies community and unified perspective, clearly the congregants in a public ritual have looser associations and more varied perspectives.

Gendered Performance and Individual Power

Thelema encourages the recognition and development of the True Will, or the expression of the higher self through choice and experience, yet the central ritual of Thelema is the Gnostic Mass, which requires members to perform publicly in gender-

[40] Psyche, "Why I Left the O.T.O," Spiral Nature, last accessed on September 30, 2014, http://www.spiralnature.com/magick/left-ordo-templi-orientis.html.

defined roles. On the one hand, performance *in* the ritual is participatory, transformative and communal but on the other hand, performance *of* the ritual requires conforming to formulaic roles with memorized speeches and sexualized actions, displayed before an audience. A woman may perform as a congregant, a Child, a Deacon or a Priestess. As a Child or a Priestess she is part of a polarity, moving reflectively at times, and marked in the liturgy by terms which indicate sexual status: Child (not sexually mature) or Virgin (sexually mature and wearing a red girdle). At the beginning of the liturgy, Crowley describes the essential characteristics of the Priestess:

> THE PRIESTESS. Should be actually Virgo Intacta, or specially dedicated to the service of the Great Order. She is clothed in white, blue, and gold. She bears the Sword from a red girdle, and the paten and hosts, or Cakes of Light.[41]

As Virgin, she enters the temple with sword and paten, she greets the congregation, who acknowledge her as Priestess, and from then on her role in the liturgy is designated as "The Priestess." However, when the Priest lifts her up and escorts her to the altar, he again names her Virgin and defines her not just as sexually inexperienced but as "pure, without spot," enhancing her value as natural, undamaged and worthy. By saying "I take thee," "I upraise thee," and "I set thee upon the summit of Earth," the Priest assumes control as actor. Although her value and the spiritual nature of the role are indicated by "thee," from this point forward she is possessed – by the Priest, by the deity or energy, and by the sight of the congregants. Nonetheless, the Priestess voluntarily accepts this role and local Priestesses repeatedly state that the role of Priestess is empowering, meaningful and satisfying. How the Priestess finds personal power within ritual which is

[41] *Liber XV*: "II: Of the Officers of the Mass."

bounded by sex and gender designation can perhaps be clarified by Judith Butler's theory of subjection and subversive power.

Feminist and gender theorist Judith Butler questioned the assumption that a universal category of "women" exists which can provide a stable basis for discussions about sex and gender.[42] She pointed out that the term "woman" is a partial referent because it disguises shifting contexts and other modes of identity such as race, class, sex, and age. In order to distinguish between sex and gender, early feminist formulas suggested that "female" indicated biological markers such as chromosomes and genitalia, while "woman" indicated a socially constructed gender with qualities that might be "feminine" and/or "masculine." Butler claimed that sex designations such as "female" are not necessarily evidential or permanent, as in cases of ambivalent chromosome markers or undeveloped, multiple or altered sex organs.[43] Bodies that do not conform with the accepted physical markers of biological sex become unintelligible or invisible, or "non-persons," in binary-sex societies.[44] Sex is socially constructed in gendered language: When a child is recognized at birth as a girl, the form and idea of "girl" precedes recognition and imitation follows naming. By assuming the sex by which it is named, the child begins to construct their social self, the "speaking-I," as a subject who is not only "that which acts," but is also the contextual field within which it acts.[45] The assumption

[42] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

[43] Ibid., 9.

[44] Ibid., 7.

[45] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993)., Introduction.

of sex/gender and its contexts and behaviors is called subjection, the self-making of the subject from the conceptual materials imbedded in society. Although this assumption of self is subordination to linguistic power structures, it is also dependent upon those same linguistic power structures for identity and agency.[46] Ultimately, the subordinated subject "assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity," which makes identity indistinguishable from the power structures which gave rise to it.[47] In every instance of language, the subject locates itself in the social relation as the actor or the audience, a reconfirmation of identity. Butler refers to Louis Althusser's example of how the self is formulated through language. If a person turns around or responds to the "Hey, you!" of a policeman, that person is constituted from the meaning of that phrase and its context as "that person" – that is, recognizing is the same as being.[48] The subject-self is only a linguistic category, a "placeholder in formation."[49] Subversive agency, or individualized power, comes from enacting a purpose unintended by the social power structure which is possible because linguistics permits it.[50] A subject can only perform through its formation, or self-making within the language power structure, which is active gendering.[51] The roles available to play are the roles already written into the narrative.

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[46] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997),.2.

[47] Ibid., 3.

[48] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 121.

[49] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 10.

[50] Ibid., 15.

[51] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

Since language creates subject and language is gendered, the subject must be gendered. Visible performance is gendered performance.

Butler's theory seems to suggest that in order to participate at all, a person must accept gendering as the consequence of language – or of relation and communication – yet within linguistic structures are options associated with partial or alternative identity. The ability to use conjunctions and qualifiers seems to create new ideas and forms between existing signifiers. The use of metaphors indicates that language is always struggling to convey perceptions and meanings that slip through cracks and around fences. While learning a new language expands the available linguistic medium and rewrites mental patterns, it allows greater flexibility and hybridization. However, the core idea in Butler's theory is that personal power must be found within the linguistic structure that forms and defines identity, which is always gendered. The degree to which personal power differs from gender norms is based on the ability to "find" it, or recognize it as an option within language, and yet such recognition indicates that one's identity has already assumed (incorporated) it. This circular reasoning does not explain well how new ideas emerge into the collective, but on a personal level, power is directly informed by ongoing identity formation and recognition. A person pronounced "a girl" at birth is always in the field of "girl," even if that person is "no longer a girl." There are choices within the field of gender but gender itself is binding precisely because identity is the expression of gendered language. If ritual is an expression of metaphor within the linguistic world, then it can only be a filtered selection of gender, but not genderless. In this case, the Gnostic Mass is based on a heterosexual binary, in which the Children are a pre-adolescent

polarity and the Priestess and the Priest are a reproductive polarity and only the Deacon is unpartnered and unmarked sexually.

The Priestess and the Priest each have a moment of identity-reformulation which is inspired by the liturgy: The Priest when he is raised from the dead and is transformed from man to Priest; the Priestess when she is raised from the floor and is transformed from "the Priestess who walks" to "the Priestess who is seated." For the Priestess, the moment of identity-reformulation happens as the Priest lifts her from the floor and calls her "Virgin." The name "Virgin" has strong sex and gender meanings, associated with youth, sexual availability, and property value. Is naming the Priestess "Virgin" a defining move? Butler thinks so: The acceptance of a name is an instant self-making in which identity shifts to accommodate the historical and social chain of meaning.[52] Notably, in the liturgy, the name "Virgin" is capitalized and has no article, unlike "The Priestess," indicating that it is a proper name or a specific Virgin rather than "a virgin" or "the virgin." Even though the literal meaning of *Virgo Intacta* refers to sexual virginity, the expected situation is that the Priestesses are instead "specially dedicated to the service of the Great Order," which is suggested by the absence of any symbolic enactment of "deflowering."[53] Although local members say the Priestess is already a Priestess when she walks in, acknowledgement from the congregation validates her as *their* Priestess.

[52] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 121-123.

[53] *Liber AL* II:37; *Liber XV*: "IV: Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil." Although the invocation of the Mystery of Mystery of the second step refers to "a feast for the first night of the Prophet and his Bride," which is in both the liturgy and in *The Book of the Law*, there is no clear indication that the Bride is a virgin. Perhaps it is understood that the Scarlet Woman, as the Bride of the Prophet, is always, in essence if not physically, the Virgin, a virgin, or a virgin-whore (as hierodule). In *The Book of the Law*, the Bride refers to Nuit (as Bride of Hadit) or to the Scarlet Woman (as Bride of the Prophet or as Bride of the Beast).

Since there is no Virgin mentioned in *The Book of the Law*, the Priestess turns to the image of "the woman girt with a sword" who is a warrior. In the local Priestesses' responses to questions about passivity in the role of the Priestess, each one referred to the Priestess' sword as evidence of empowerment. The Priestess brings her sword in with her when she enters into the temple, uses it to open the tomb and to consecrate the Priest, but lays it aside before she is "throned" (ceremoniously seated) on the altar. Since the sword has been equated in the text and in ritual action with personal power, is setting aside the sword a relinquishment of power? Apparently not, since it is immediately followed by a symbol of higher power. After sitting, the Priestess holds *The Book of the Law* against her chest with her hands in a downward triangle, a symbolic gesture that can represent woman, womb, water or invoking.[54] Metaphorically, she seems to move from the personal power of the physical world (her sword) to the divine power of the spiritual world (Thelema), which corresponds with moving around the floor (horizontally) to moving beyond the veil and above the floor to the altar (vertically). So, although she has relinquished her sword and has been "throned," a movement that implies being passively placed by another, the Priestess has exchanged one form of power for another and, arguably, a lower power for a higher power, or the lower will for the True Will.

The Priestess is linked to objects which seem to confirm her gender identity, especially the cup (also called the Graal) and the Cakes of Light. She carries the paten with the cakes into the temple at the beginning of Mass, which associates her with matter which is to be consecrated and fertilized. The cakes are commonly made by the Priestess

[54] Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, translated by John Buchanan-Brown (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 1034.

and may include a tiny amount of menstrual blood ash. The cup is part of the altar and is there when the ritual begins and, except during consecration and consummation, is kept covered and guarded by the Priestess (who is herself a consecrated part of the altar). Although the cup is not brought in by the Priestess, she is connected to it symbolically in two ways: First, since the lance is the emblem of the male Priest and the cup is the partner of the lance, and the Priestess is the partner of the Priest, so too is the cup the emblem of the Priestess. Secondly, the cup is the symbol of the womb and is the container into which a particle of the host is submerged at the tip of the lance. The Priestess is also associated with the womb in the Anthem chorus in which the men's lines link "gilded tomb" and "earth unplowed" and the women's link "waiting womb" and "virgin vowed."[55] In this case, "virgin" is not capitalized and may refer to the women congregants as well as the Priestess. Although the connection between man-lance and woman-cup may not be directly stated within the ritual, it is indicative of the language of sex/gender throughout the ritual. Recognition of the roles of the Mass officers hinges upon the heterosexual union formula which may be instilled through training but is also confirmed in symbols, words and action. If, in practice, the Priestess is not a virgin or is infertile or no longer has a womb, can it be said that she is the cup merely because she is the Priest's partner and he is the lance? Is being the chosen partner of the Priest enough to be the Priestess? What links cup to woman? This is the linguistic power structure which identifies subjects.

[55] This is a clever pun – "earth unplowed" may be a graveyard or, metaphorically, a virgin. From this, one might mystically equate tomb with womb, death with birth, West with East, and earth with heaven.

Since the lance, the sword, the cup and the paten (disk) are also part of the esoteric language of magic, tarot, alchemy and Jungian psychology in which they often represent the will, the mind, the emotions, and the body, it is easy to formulate other gender identities through language that already exists. Despite the "obviousness" of heterosexuality in the Mass, the union represented could be self-creative rather than reproductive, which might be represented by bisexuality, hybridization or androgyny and is hinted at in the verse:

> For the Father and the Son
> The Holy Spirit is the norm;
> Male-female, quintessential, one,
> Man-being veiled in woman-form.[56]

Butler's theory suggests that subversive power is always present in gender, gendered language and gender identity, but it must be "found." On the one hand, any gendered identity might recognize itself as a multi-gendered identity within the language present; on the other hand, this may involve the reformulation or rereading of symbols, words and actions so that subversive identity is revealed. While "Virgin" may be easily subverted, other gendered symbols or words such as "womb" and "cup" require a finding-awareness that recognizes the subversive power already present. While they do not necessarily seek to subvert gendered performativity, the local Priestesses find their power in the heterosexual formula of the Gnostic Mass by making use of their gendered selves to symbolize the transformative union experienced by every man and every woman. Even though they do not call themselves feminists, they recognize the gendering of the Mass and they consciously examine and transform the borders of their own identities,

[56] *Liber XV*: "VII: On the Office of the Anthem."

participating in a dramatic ritual which expresses divine self-making. The gendered self serves in a performance of the transformative union of gender. To be a Gnostic Mass Priestess *is* a form of protest; she is a subversive within binary gendering as a redeemer of women's image, sexuality and fertility, insisting they are her own to experience and to define. The Priestess is subversive not because she chooses to perform in a public ritual as a magical partner, a channel for archetypal energy, or an image of inspiration, but because she resists identifying her own experience with her role.

Gender, Channeling and Speech

In addition to imaging and performing, the role of the Priestess also includes channeling. According to the interviewees, channeling is thought to be conscious, calm, filtering, focusing, intentional and controlled. Frequently, the Priestesses (and some of the Priests) would describe the activity of the Priestess on the altar as channeling, by which they meant she contains and releases the energy raised by the Mass. Occasionally, the Priest referred to his own performance as Hadit, his expression of enthusiasm, or the delivery of the blessing as channeling. In general, though, the description and interpretation of channeling in the ritual was provided by the Priestesses. The experience of the Priestess while seated on the altar is so essential to the Gnostic Mass that the Priestess exercises a great deal of power through the performance and interpretation of her role. Further, since the Gnostic Mass is the central ritual of Thelema and of the O.T.O., the way that the Gnostic Mass is described, interpreted and discussed greatly affects public and private opinions about Thelema and the O.T.O. This can be seen very clearly in the local consensus that the Priestess channels energy but does not embody a goddess. Moreover, the two Bishop-Priestesses suggest that the energy channeled may

not be gendered or may be inhuman. These descriptions impact all other interpretations of the Mass: If a deity or spirit is not channeled, then the Mass is not devotional (although it may be mystical); if the energy is feminine but infinite or unnamable, then the Mass centers around Nuit or some divine feminine (but not Babalon); if the energy is ungendered, then the Mass is not based on reproductive union but possibly on an alchemical union of two perfected beings; and if the energy is inhuman, then the Mass is not the child of two human energies but is perhaps an androgynous hybrid formed of intention. Perhaps none of these are true: The point is that the Priestess' channeling experience is central to interpretation precisely because she has been throned, consecrated and offered as vessel for the Mass energy.

Susan Starr Sered explores the relationship between gender, power and forms of spirit interaction, including trance, possession, mediumship and channeling. Trance, or altered states of consciousness induced by drumming, dancing, or meditation, is more likely to be practiced by men; however, possession, or the belief that spirits or deities can enter people or that people can temporarily become spirits or deities, is more likely to be practiced by women.[57] Studies have suggested that for women who are disadvantaged or subordinate, these practices give them an opportunity to lead, speak or behave unconventionally, and, significantly, women are often possessed by male spirits.[58] People in communities with possession practices say that women are better candidates for possession because they are submissive, soft, permeable, emotional, connected with

[57] Susan Starr Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 182.

[58] Ibid., 182-183.

others, devotional, or have a more developed inner life.[59] As spiritual healers, men are more likely to be shamans and experience ecstatic flight to gain healing knowledge, while women are more likely to be mediums and experience "in-dwelling" or act as instruments for healing spirits.[60] Although possession generally includes sharing the body, it is not necessarily uncontrolled or spontaneous; possession is often scheduled, ritually constructed, and the result of training.[61] Ross Kraemer claims that possession is a "gendered, embodied metaphor rooted in women's physical experiences of heterosexual intercourse and pregnancy."[62] Hilary Graham also compares possession to pregnancy and points out that both the indwelt person and the dweller are marginal and indeterminate socially.[63] Sered points out that from the perspective of the audience, possession allows people to relate directly with spirit and allows spirit to interact in human life.[64] According to Thomas Csordas, possession "can be seen as a pure form of ritual drama, where the parts of deities are not played by humans, but where the deities in effect play themselves."[65] Since possession opens the door to direct divine experience, possession does not enact myth, possession creates myth.

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[59] Ibid., 185-188.

[60] Ibid., 186-187.

[61] Ibid., 189.

[62] Ross Kraemer, from personal communication with Susan Starr Sered (1993), quoted in Sered, *Priestess Mother Sacred Sister*, 190.

[63] Hilary Graham, from *The Social Image of Pregnancy: Pregnancy as Spiritual Possession*, The Sociological Review 24(2), 296 (1976), quoted in Sered, *Priestess Mother Sacred Sister*, 190.

[64] Sered, *Priestess Mother Sacred Sister*, 191.

[65] Thomas J. Csordas, from "Health and the Holy in African and Afro-American Spirit Possession," *Social Science and Medicine* 24(1): 6 (1987), quoted in Sered, *Priestess Mother Sacred Sister*, 191.

If women are naturally able to be Priestesses in the Gnostic Mass because they are initiated by their body experience, where is the locus of the ability to channel? Is it in the female body or in feminine gendering? While, like possession, channeling is associated with indwelling and "sharing the body," channeling typically communicates information.[66] Rose Crowley channeled (while pregnant) and informed Crowley that "they" were waiting and he should invoke Horus; subsequently, Crowley channeled *The Book of the Law* by writing down the message as he "heard" it.[67] Although Crowley remained consciously present and able to write, he did seem to experience this hearing as an eroticized indwelling. Channeling the voice of Hadit, he writes:

> I am uplifted in thine heart; and the kisses of the stars rain hard upon thy body. Thou art exhaust in the voluptuous fullness of the inspiration; the expiration is sweeter than death, more rapid and laughterful that a caress of Hell's own worm. Oh! Thou art overcome: we are upon thee; our delight is all over thee: hail! hail: prophet of Nu! prophet of Had! prophet of Ra-Hoor-Khu! Now rejoice! now come in our splendor & rapture! Come in our passionate peace, & write sweet words for the Kings! I am the Master: thou art the Holy Chosen One. Write, & find ecstasy in writing! Work, & be our bed in working! Thrill with the joy of life & death! Ah! Thy death shall be lovely: whoso seeth it shall be glad. Thy death shall be the seal of the promise of our agelong love. Come! lift up thine heart & rejoice! We are one; we are none.[68]

The local Priestesses do not refer to their channeling experiences in erotic terms; however, one Priest who spoke of invoking the god in terms of "receiving the Lord," comparable to approaching as a woman and "wanting to be filled," and like Crowley he

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[66] Arthur Hastings, *With the Tongues of Men and Angels: A Study of Channeling* (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1991), 3.

[67] Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002), 120.

[68] *Liber AL* II: 62-66.

describes the gods as having power and mastery greater than his own, suggesting that invocation may inherently have a quality of domination and penetration. There seems to be a difference, perhaps subtle, between using erotic symbolism to represent divine union (metaphor), using enthusiasm or eros to stimulate or invoke divine union (sex magic), and having an erotic experience of divine union (mysticism). This third distinction might indicate that sex and gender are inherently present in the divine-human power relationship, not only in gendering language but in gendered experience, suggesting perhaps that Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is an erotic experience.[69] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to address this, but Crowley and the local Bishop-Priest both seem to indicate that invocation and channeling are perceived not only as feminine but feminizing.

Arthur Hastings gives an extensive list of characteristics common to channeled communications – including many demonstrated by Crowley – such as rapidly produced and unedited final forms, claims of prophecy, and information given beyond the knowledge of the channeler.[70] According to Hastings, channeling and mediumship differ from trance and some other forms of possession because they coherently and intelligibly transmit information received from an external source:

> Channeling refers to a process in which a person transmits information or artistic expression that he or she receives mentally or physically and which appears to come from a personality source outside of the conscious mind. The message is directed toward an audience and is purposeful.[71]

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[69] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

[70] Hastings, *With the Tongues*, 156-157.

[71] Ibid., 4.

The local Priestesses describe their channeling as a purposeful flow of energy or a communion of gazes in which their audience is the Priest: The energy that the Priestess and the Priest invoke together is contained by the Priestess and distributed in Priest's blessing. The message is implicitly the realization that "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods," which is repeated by the congregation; however, this is from the written liturgy and not necessarily a result of channeling as Hastings describes it. Instead, it often may be a proclamation of faith or an act of remembrance of Crowley's original channeling rather than a vital communication. The local Priestesses do not appear to receive original verbal or written messages during channeling, perhaps because they do not strongly associate their channeling with a deity or an external personality. Although the Priestess speaks twice from behind the veil and presumably in a state of connection with the infinite, she performs the speeches as written in the liturgy. Otherwise, while seated she is profoundly silent while the Priest delivers complicated speeches which demand familiarity with Greek and Latin pronunciation, vocal intonation and significantly more memorization. Further, not only is the Priestess in the Gnostic Mass less overtly communicative than the Priest, but her role in the community is also relatively silent. Few Priestesses have been interviewed and even fewer write about their experiences or interpretations. The Priestesses are not organized into a focus group nor do they have a High Priestess or senior Priestess to speak for them as a group. Although the role of the Priestess – particularly in their function as channelers – might provide valuable understanding of the Gnostic Mass, the tendency for the Priestesses to be silent, anonymous and invisible in the public arena means that some communication inherent in the channel is also hidden. Encouraging the Priestesses to write about their experiences

would not only contribute greatly to the visible empowerment of women, it would also help communicate more fully the energy of the Mass as both the means and the expression of transformation.

The Priestess in the Gnostic Mass: A Different Gnosis?

In the Gnostic Mass, there are two types of transformation: Personal transformation and Aeonic transformation. Personal transformation is defined by the proclamation "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods," a statement which explicitly refers to identification with the energy of multiple gods described in the liturgy and in the mythos found in *The Book of the Law*. This personal transformation does not make the claim that the congregant *is* a god but that the congregant is wholly made of god-stuff and, like the gods, fearless, powerful and creative. The second transformation in the Gnostic Mass is the coming of the New Aeon which is symbolized as the birth of a divine child, "the destroyer of the destroyer," from the union of two energies represented by Nuit as "the stooping starlight" and Hadit as "the winged secret flame."[72] The union of opposites might be symbolized by a two-natured child (Ra-Hoor-Khuit), a bisexual androgyne (Baphomet), or by a hybridized divinity (Abraxas, Meitras, IAO). The union of opposites imagined in the Mass is also possible in the individual, making the image of the androgyne symbolic of both two-naturedness and hybridity. In any of these possibilities, it is not the single gender of masculine or feminine which is the site of transformation but the union of the two. In the Gnostic Mass, the Priestess and the Priest function as illustrations of the union of perfected polarities into one perfected being whose balance between genders can only be described as all and none. Essential to this

[72] *Liber XV*: "VIII: Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements;" *Liber AL* I:16.

union, and particularly to the creation of the divine child, is the polarized feminine which is attractive, fertile and nurturing: As Nuit, she is heavenly, infinite and the body of space, as Babalon, she is earthy, manifested and the womb of life.

Although the Priestess performs the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass, she is also herself both an individual participant and an embodied woman. She performs the Mass not only as a gendered subject which experiences but also as a gendered subject which is experienced by others. The Priest and the congregation perceive her as an image of the feminine and channel of feminine energies which invokes enthusiasm and inspiration. Although she may appear passive, she is an active ritualist even when seated on the altar through her co-creative relationship with the Priest, her choice of ornamentation, her hand movements which control timing, and her ability to contain and release energy without distraction. While it may appear that as a naked, silent and stiffly-posed image of the feminine she is subjugated to heterosexual performativity, the local Priestess perceives her role as serving the Priest as a focus of energy, serving the congregation as a partner in the Priest's blessing, and serving the Mass itself as a vessel for the sacred. She associates her personal power with her serpentine walk and her sword, and her spiritual power with channeling and controlled receptivity. She is not oppressed by the heterosexual formula because she voluntarily participates as a gendered performer with the understanding that the embodied female experience is valued and necessary to invoke (and evoke) the procreative and transformative energies of the Mass.

Nonetheless, her image is not fully her own: The Priestess is subject to the expectations and interpretations of the Priest and the congregation. She can control this assumption of her image through her movements, voice and robe while active on the

floor but when seated and elevated, she has limited control over how her image is projected. The Priestess can choose to rerobe either partially or fully before the veil is opened, she can wear eye shadow and jewelry to emphasize identification with the Other ("not me"), she can control timing by how she offers and holds objects, and she can choose how she interacts with others by meeting or not meeting gazes. Although public nakedness might be seen as a form of subversion, nakedness in the Gnostic Mass is ritually-constructed to impersonally emphasize the archetype of the feminine which is both visible and veiled. Her visual attractiveness, ability to contain, and apparent fertility seems to be important to many of the congregants and to some of the Priests, since the Priestess is thought to represent either Nuit or Babalon, infinite space or the earthy lover. The enthusiasm of the Priest is directly related to his attraction to the Priestess, although that attraction may include visual, energetic and emotional stimuli and the reciprocity of the Priestess. The Priestess' ability to channel is considered to be an aspect of the embodied experience of a woman, but since channeling is the result of indwelling and invocation is also a type of indwelling, both channeling and invocation might be considered feminizing.

Since the role of the Priestess is to contain the energies of the Mass, she is associated with the space of the temple, the altar, the womb and the cup. This containment is not simply a holding but also a nurturing incubation in which energy/material is invoked/fertilized which results in a release/birth of the transformative energy/child. Consummation is not only the orgasmic whisper of the Priestess and the Priest, it is also the consummation of the elements, or the mingling of the host and the wine, which is symbolically shared with the congregants in the Cakes of Light and in the

blessing. The fertility of the Priestess is implicit and while infertile women are permitted to serve as Priestesses, several interviewees suggested that infertile Priestesses should at least have the appearance and energy of fertility. Although none of the interviews referred to the Scarlet Women or Crowley's writings about them, considering that the role of the Scarlet Woman and the role of the Priestess are drawn from the same inspired source, *The Book of the Law*, disregarding the Crowley's comments on the attractiveness and fertility of the Scarlet Women would appear to hide the historical context of gender in the Gnostic Mass. Further, this issue of reproductive fertility impacts debates about gender-alternative Masses: If the Mass formula is heterosexual union but it is not necessary that it be based in biological fact, then perhaps the feminine qualification is really containment as a symbolic cup, as receptacle for invocation or receptacle for the lance. Or, if the role is itself feminizing, then potentially any person could perform as the Priestess. How symbolic language can be interpreted rests on two factors: Its efficacy, which can only be known through experimentation, and the recognition of meaning, which is in the eye of the beholder.

The performance of power for the Priestess largely depends on the spectator's interpretation of the liturgy. As a result of the centrality of the Priest's actions in the Gnostic Mass, it may appear that the Priestess wakes the Priest, robes him as a king and then sits quietly while he directs the rest of the ritual. Although the Priestess leads the action prior to the transfer of power at "I take thee, Virgin, pure of spot," she is replaced as soon as the Priest is raised and consecrated, implying perhaps that she is only a temporary leader. Her public nakedness might be superficially interpreted as an expression of patriarchal power, but to understand what she is doing besides visually

representing Nuit would be difficult to determine from the liturgy alone. As Butler suggests, the linguistic context of "feminine" is as flexible as the perceivable perspectives; however, nakedness may limit those interpretations to visual concepts about the body. Visual interpretation may be more easily found in the actions of the Priest who assists her to sit, consecrates her, hides and reveals her, stands facing her as he speaks, adores at her feet, touches her body, exchanges objects with her, gives her his lance to hold, whispers with her and stands nearby as the congregation comes forward. His actions and words may describe her to the congregation more than her actions and words describe herself. In the liturgy, the Priestess is associated with virgin, seductress, hidden voice, attractive body, waiting womb and mother to the divine child. Although the local Priestesses convincingly claim personal empowerment beyond the satisfactions of sexuality and motherhood, this is not necessarily apparent to the Mass visitor.

If feminism is the examination of alternative gazes, the feminist researcher must acknowledge the dual role of the Priestess from her own viewpoint. The Priestess leads the Children into the temple, creates ritual space with her serpentine walk, opens the tomb with the point of her sword, raises a man from the dead, dresses and consecrates him as a Priest and invokes the serpent power. This activity is as much the work of the Priestess as channeling, but the identification of the Priestess with her naked image overshadows her ritual intentionality. If the Priestess is thought to relinquish power due to the order of events, simply imagining the channeling first and the raising second would emphasize feminist liberation. Perhaps even for the feminist gaze, activity distracts from stillness, speaking is louder than silence, the clothed female body is more dignified than the naked one, and linear time marks progress or decline. If the temple floor is examined

carefully, it becomes apparent that the Priestess and the Priest are complementary: In the West, she is most active; in the East, he is most active. Given the visual centrality of the naked Priestess, perhaps if the man was awakened naked in his tomb, the complementary nature of their roles would be more apparent.[73] Why, then, does he return to his tomb, while she remains on the altar behind the veil and does not return to her life as a human woman? Perhaps because those who are elevated in the lap of the divine cannot return; they are permanently indwelt, transformed and dissolved in unity. Perhaps, at the same time, the Mass is the story of the awakened human who seeks a partner with whom to experience union and creation and, after passing life's wisdom on to others, returns confidently and willingly to the grave. Whether either (or both) of these interpretations is true, Butler's theory that gendering may be inherent in the linguistic structure of power suggests that gnosis experienced by the Priestess must necessarily be different than gnosis experienced by the Priest. When trying to understand the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass, the feminist gaze must move from perspective to perspective, among congregants and officers, male and female, floor and summit, in order to comprehend the whole.

This thesis has provided the opportunity to preliminarily review the limited available materials about the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass as reflected in the work of the Priestess. In order to better communicate the role of the Priestess, she needs to speak and write so that other women can recognize what the Gnostic Mass is offering them. Since the Mass is a gateway to the O.T.O., it is especially important that the

[73] In the Priestess' call to the Priest from behind the veil, speaking in the words of Nuit from *The Book of the Law*, she says: "I charge you earnestly to come before me in a single robe, and covered with a rich headdress." *Liber AL* I:61; *Liber XV*: "IV: Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil."

gendered language in the Mass is understood by prospective members since, as Hedenborg-White has noted, gender performance in the Gnostic Mass does not necessarily reflect gender performance in the O.T.O. Brandy Williams has made a good start in articulating the goals of Feminist Thelema and quite rightly asserts that women's leadership and publication should be actively encouraged. Key areas of research should include a national study of women's experiences as participants in the Gnostic Mass; a focus group on LGBTQ members and their views on gender performativity in the Gnostic Mass; a biography of Gnostic Mass Priestesses; an examination of gendering in the other Mass roles; and the development of post-Mass surveys for visiting and nonmember congregants to discover their reactions to gender symbolism and performance. Further, although I have been told that members do not discuss *The Book of the Law*, public commentary by informed members would greatly increase interest and understanding in the Gnostic Mass. The role of the Priestess in the Gnostic Mass highlights performance differences between women magicians and other women ritualists such as neo-pagans, shamans or Wiccans; this should be explored further. Victor Turner's liminality theory could be usefully applied to the invoked states of the Priestess and the Priest and the evoked responses of the congregation, along with the threshold positioning of the tomb, the steps, the veil, and the altar. Although I did not attempt it here, the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass could be examined from the perspective of Hermetic Kabbalah and the feminine sefirot. Last, but certainly not least, the symbolism of androgyny and hybridism in the Gnostic Mass should be examined in relation to Crowley's other works.

Since so little research is publicly available about the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass, two cautions should be restated. First, this research is focused on one lodge in which all the members have been trained by the same bishops and with the same equipment, space and performance text. Secondly, in order to approach the role of the feminine within the scope of a thesis, the role of the Priestess was the primary focus. This would seem to occlude other aspects of the feminine, particularly in regard to the other Mass officers and the congregation. However, while it is difficult to fully understand the role of the feminine in the Gnostic Mass from this small sample, this method of participant observation does provide a deeper description of the Priestess' experience as magician and as channel. As a case study, this ritual demonstrates several important ethnographic questions in gender and performance. On the one hand, the ritual when created might have been considered avant-garde and liberating for women; on the other hand, the ritual is a hundred years old and assumptions underlying performance about sexuality, fertility, and energy may no longer reflect current social attitudes. It is too simplistic to say that the visual aspects of the ritual define the experience of the participants; to disregard the persistent claims of personal empowerment would be to cling stubbornly to an observational bias. Although revision of the ritual liturgy is not officially permitted, modern practitioners interpret and reorient meaning following the founder's liturgy and other works, authorized performance manuals, local training sessions and personal experience. There is a growing movement within the O.T.O. to address this reorientation of meaning by exploring the contributions of minority voices, the legacy of Crowley's personal history, and the core theology of Thelema. The Gnostic Mass, as the central ritual of the O.T.O., illustrates the tension between gender

representation and personal experience in communal ritual which must be negotiated individually and as a community through self-examination, experimentation and reinterpretation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Gnostic Mass Ritual (*Liber XV*)

Liber XV
O.T.O.
Ecclesiæ Gnosticæ Catholicæ
Canon Missæ[1]

Edited from the Ancient Documents
in Assyrian and Greek by The Master Therion

I
Of the Furnishings of the Temple

In the East, that is, in the direction of Boleskine, which is situated on the South-Eastern shore of Loch Ness in Scotland, two miles East of Foyers, is a shrine or High Altar. Its dimensions should be seven feet in length, three feet in breadth, 44 inches in height. It should be covered with a crimson altar-cloth, on which may be embroidered fleur-de-lys in gold, or a sunblaze, or other suitable emblem.

On each side of it should be a pillar or obelisk, with countercharges in black and white.

Below it should be the dais of three steps, in black and white squares.

Above it is the super-altar, at whose top is the Stèle of Revealing in reproduction, with four candles on each side of it. Below the stèle is a place for *The Book of the Law*, with six candles on each side of it. Below this again is the Holy Graal, with roses on each side of it. There is room in front of the Cup for the Paten. On each side beyond the roses are two great candles.

All this is enclosed within a great Veil.

Forming the apex of an equilateral triangle whose base is a line drawn between the pillars, is a small black square altar, of two superimposed cubes.

Taking this altar as the middle of the base of a similar and equal triangle, at the apex of this second triangle is a small circular font.

Repeating, the apex of a third triangle is an upright tomb.

[1] Aleister Crowley, "O. T. O. Liber XV Ecclesiæ Gnosticæ Catholicæ Canon Missæ." US Grand Lodge Ordo Templi Orientis, last accessed September 30, 2014, http://lib.otousa.org/libri/liber0015.html. [approval for use pending]

II
Of the Officers of the Mass

The PRIEST. Bears the Sacred Lance, and is clothed at first in a plain white robe.

The PRIESTESS. Should be actually Virgo Intacta or specially dedicated to the service of the Great Order. She is clothed in white, blue, and gold. She bears the Sword from a red girdle, and the Paten and Hosts, or Cakes of Light.

The DEACON. He is clothed in white and yellow. He bears *The Book of the Law*.

Two CHILDREN. They are clothed in white and black. One bears a pitcher of water and a cellar of salt, the other a censer of fire and a casket of perfume.

III
Of the Ceremony of the Introit

The DEACON, opening the door of the Temple, admits the congregation and takes his stand between the small altar and the font. (There should be a doorkeeper to attend to the admission.) The DEACON advances and bows before the open shrine where the Graal is exalted. He kisses The Book of the Law *three times, opens it, and places it upon the super-altar. He turns West.*

The DEACON: Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. I proclaim the Law of Light, Life, Love, and Liberty in the name of ’IAΩ.

The CONGREGATION: Love is the law, love under will.

The DEACON goes to his place between the altar of incense and the font, faces East, and gives the step and sign of a Man and a Brother. All imitate him.

The DEACON and all the PEOPLE:

I believe in one secret and ineffable LORD; and in one Star in the Company of Stars of whose fire we are created, and to which we shall return; and in one Father of Life, Mystery of Mystery, in His name CHAOS, the sole viceregent of the Sun upon the Earth; and in one Air the nourisher of all that breathes.

And I believe in one Earth, the Mother of us all, and in one Womb wherein all men are begotten, and wherein they shall rest, Mystery of Mystery, in Her name BABALON.

And I believe in the Serpent and the Lion, Mystery of Mystery, in His name BAPHOMET.

And I believe in one Gnostic and Catholic Church of Light, Life, Love and Liberty, the Word of whose Law is ΘΕΛΗΜΑ.

And I believe in the communion of Saints.

And, forasmuch as meat and drink are transmuted in us daily into spiritual substance, I believe in the Miracle of the Mass.

And I confess one Baptism of Wisdom whereby we accomplish the Miracle of Incarnation.

And I confess my life one, individual, and eternal that was, and is, and is to come.

ʼΆΥΜΓΝ. ʼΆΥΜΓΝ. ʼΆΥΜΓΝ.

Music is now played. The child enters with the ewer and the salt. The VIRGIN enters with the Sword and the Paten. The child enters with the censer and the perfume. They face the DEACON, deploying into line from the space between the two altars.

The VIRGIN: Greeting of Earth and Heaven!

All give the Hailing sign of a Magician, the DEACON leading.

The PRIESTESS, the negative child on her left, the positive child on her right, ascends the steps of the High Altar. They await her below. She places the Paten before the Graal. Having adored it, she descends, and with the children following her, the positive next her, she moves in a serpentine manner involving 3½ circles of the Temple. (Deosil about altar, widdershins about font, deosil about altar and font, widdershins about altar, and so to the Tomb in the West.) She draws her Sword and pulls down the Veil therewith.

The PRIESTESS: By the power of ☩ Iron, I say unto thee, Arise. In the name of our Lord ☩ the Sun, and of our Lord ☩ ... that thou mayst administer the virtues to the Brethren.

She sheathes the Sword.

The PRIEST, issuing from the Tomb, holding the Lance erect with both hands, right over left, against his breast, takes the first three regular steps. He then gives the Lance to the PRIESTESS, and gives the three penal signs. He then kneels and worships the Lance with both hands. Penitential music.

The PRIEST: I am a man among men.

He takes again the Lance, and lowers it. He rises.

The PRIEST: How should I be worthy to administer the virtues to the Brethren?

The PRIESTESS takes from the child the water and the salt, and mixes them in the font.

The PRIESTESS: Let the salt of Earth admonish the water to bear the virtue of the Great Sea. *(Genuflects.)* Mother, be thou adored.

She returns to the West. ☩ on PRIEST with open hand doth she make, over his forehead, breast, and body.

Be the PRIEST pure of body and soul!

The PRIESTESS takes the censer from the child, and places it on the small altar. She puts incense therein.

Let the Fire and the Air make sweet the world! *(Genuflects.)*

Father, be thou adored!

She returns West, and makes ☩ with the censer before the PRIEST, thrice as before.

Be the PRIEST fervent of body and soul!

(The children resume their weapons as they are done with.)

The DEACON now takes the consecrated Robe from High Altar, and brings it to her. She robes the PRIEST in his Robe of scarlet and gold.

Be the flame of the Sun thine ambience, O thou PRIEST of the SUN!

The DEACON brings the crown from the High Altar. (The crown may be of gold or platinum, or of electrum magicum; but with no other metals, save the small proportions necessary to a proper alloy. It may be adorned with divers jewels, at will. But it must have the Urœus serpent twined about it, and the cap of maintenance must match the scarlet of the Robe. Its texture should be velvet.)

Be the Serpent thy crown, O thou PRIEST of the LORD!

Kneeling, she takes the Lance, between her open hands, and runs them up and down upon the shaft eleven times, very gently.

Be the LORD present among us!

All give the Hailing Sign.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

IV
Of the Ceremony of the Opening of the Veil

The PRIEST: Thee therefore whom we adore we also invoke.

By the power of the lifted Lance!

He raises the Lance. All repeat Hailing Sign. A phrase of triumphant music. The PRIEST takes the PRIESTESS by her right hand with his left, keeping the Lance raised.

I, PRIEST and KING, take thee, Virgin pure without spot; I upraise thee; I lead thee to the East; I set thee upon the summit of the Earth.

He thrones the PRIESTESS upon the altar. The DEACON and the children follow, they in rank, behind him. The PRIESTESS takes The Book of the Law, *resumes her seat, and holds it open on her breast with her two hands, making a descending triangle with thumbs and forefingers. The PRIEST gives the lance to the DEACON to hold, and takes the ewer from the child, and sprinkles the PRIESTESS, making five crosses, forehead, shoulders, and thighs. The thumb of the PRIEST is always between his index and medius, whenever he is not holding the Lance. The PRIEST takes the censer from the child, and makes five crosses, as before. The children replace their weapons on their respective altars. The PRIEST kisses* The Book of the Law *three times. He kneels for a space in adoration, with joined hands, knuckles closed, thumb in position as aforesaid. He rises and draws the veil over the whole altar. All rise and stand to order. The PRIEST takes the lance from the DEACON, and holds it as before, as Osiris or Pthah. He circumambulates the Temple three times, followed by the DEACON and the children as before. (These, when not using their hands, keep their arms crossed upon their breasts.) At the last circumambulation they leave him, and go to the place between the font and the small altar, where they kneel in adoration, their hands joined palm to palm, and raised above their heads. All imitate this motion. The PRIEST returns to the East and mounts the first step of the altar.*

The PRIEST:

O circle of Stars whereof our Father is but the younger brother, marvel beyond imagination, soul of infinite space, before whom Time is Ashamed, the mind bewildered, and the understanding dark, not unto Thee may we attain, unless Thine image be Love. Therefore by seed and root and stem and bud and leaf and flower and fruit do we invoke Thee.

Then the priest answered & said unto the Queen of Space, kissing her lovely brows, and the dew of her light bathing his whole body in a sweet-smelling perfume of sweat; O

Nuit, continuous one of Heaven, let it be ever thus; that men speak not of thee as One but as None; and let them speak not of thee at all, since thou art continuous!

During this speech the PRIESTESS must have divested herself completely of her robe. (See CCXX I:62.)

The PRIESTESS:

But to love me is better than all things: if under the night-stars in the desert thou presently burnest mine incense before me, invoking me with a pure heart, and the Serpent flame therein, thou shalt come a little to lie in my bosom. For one kiss wilt thou then be willing to give all; but whoso gives one particle of dust shall lose all in that hour. Ye shall gather goods and store of women and spices; ye shall wear rich jewels; ye shall exceed the nations of the earth in splendour and pride; but always in the love of me, & so shall ye come to my joy. I charge you earnestly to come before me in a single robe, and covered with a rich head-dress. I love you! I yearn to you! Pale or purple, veiled or voluptuous, I who am all pleasure and purple, and drunkenness of the innermost sense, desire you. Put on the wings, and arouse the coiled splendour within you: come unto me! To me! To me! Sing the rapturous love-song unto me! Burn to me perfumes! Wear to me jewels! Drink to me, for I love you! I love you! I am the blue-lidded daughter of Sunset; I am the naked brilliance of the voluptuous night-sky. To me! To me!

The PRIEST mounts the second step.

The PRIEST:

O secret of secrets that art hidden in the being of all that lives, not Thee do we adore, for that which adoreth is also Thou. Thou art That, and That am I.

I am the flame that burns in every heart of man, and in the core of every star. I am Life, and the giver of Life; yet therefore is the knowledge of me the knowledge of death. I am alone; there is no God where I am.

The DEACON and all rise to their feet with the Hailing sign.

The DEACON:

But ye, O my people rise up & awake.
Let the rituals be rightly performed with joy & beauty!
There are rituals of the elements and feasts of the times.
A feast for the first night of the Prophet and his Bride!
A feast for the three days of the writing of the Book of the Law.
A feast for Tahuti and the child of the Prophet— secret, O Prophet!
A feast for the Supreme Ritual, and a feast for the Equinox of the Gods.
A feast for fire and a feast for water; a feast for life and a greater feast for death!

A feast every day in your hearts in the joy of my rapture!
A feast every night unto Nu, and the pleasure of uttermost delight!

The PRIEST mounts the third step.

The PRIEST:

Thou that art One, our Lord in the Universe, the Sun, our Lord in ourselves whose name is Mystery of Mystery, uttermost being whose radiance, enlightening the worlds, is also the breath that maketh every God even and Death to tremble before Thee— By the Sign of Light ☩ appear Thou glorious upon the throne of the Sun.

Make open the path of creation and of intelligence between us and our minds. Enlighten our understanding. Encourage our hearts. Let thy light crystallize itself in our blood, fulfilling us of Resurrection.

A ka dua
Tuf ur biu
bi a'a chefu
Dudu nur af an nuteru!

The PRIESTESS: There is no law beyond Do what thou wilt.

The PRIEST parts the veil with his lance. During the previous speeches the PRIESTESS has, if necessary, as in savage countries, resumed her robe.

The PRIEST:

Ἴω Ἴω Ἴω Ἰαω Σαβαω Κυριη Ἀβρασαξ Κυριη Μειθρας Κυριη Φαλλη. Ἴω Παν, Ἴω Παν Παν, Ἴω Ἰσχυρον, Ἴω Ἀθανατον, Ἴω Ἄβροτον, Ἴω Ἰαω. Χαιρε Φαλλη Χαιρε Πανφαγη Χαιρε Πανγενετορ. Ἅγιος, Ἅγιος, Ἅγιος Ἰαω.

The PRIESTESS is seated with the Paten in her right hand and the Cup in her left. The PRIEST presents the Lance, which she kisses eleven times. She then holds it to her breast, while the PRIEST, falling at her knees, kisses them, his arms stretched along her thighs. He remains in this adoration while the DEACON intones the Collects. All stand to order, with the Dieu Garde, that is, feet square, hands, with linked thumbs, held loosely. This is the universal position when standing, unless other direction is given.

V
Of the Office of the Collects
Which Are Eleven in Number

The Sun

The DEACON: Lord visible and sensible of whom this earth is but a frozen spark turning about thee with annual and diurnal motion, source of light, source of life, let thy perpetual radiance hearten us to continual labour and enjoyment; so that as we are constant partakers of thy bounty we may in our particular orbit give out light and life, sustenance and joy to them that revolve about us without diminution of substance or effulgence for ever.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

The Lord

The DEACON: Lord secret and most holy, source of light, source of life, source of love, source of liberty, be thou ever constant and mighty within us, force of energy, fire of motion; with diligence let us ever labour with thee, that we may remain in thine abundant joy.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

The Moon

The DEACON: Lady of night, that turning ever about us art now visible and now invisible in thy season, be thou favourable to hunters, and lovers, and to all men that toil upon the earth, and to all mariners upon the sea.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

The Lady

The DEACON: Giver and receiver of joy, gate of life and love, be thou ever ready, thou and thine handmaiden, in thine office of gladness.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

The Saints

The DEACON: Lord of Life and Joy, that art the might of man, that art the essence of every true god that is upon the surface of the Earth, continuing knowledge from

generation unto generation, thou adored of us upon heaths and in woods, on mountains and in caves, openly in the marketplaces and secretly in the chambers of our houses, in temples of gold and ivory and marble as in these other temples of our bodies, we worthily commemorate them worthy that did of old adore thee and manifest thy glory unto men,

(At each name the DEACON signs ☩ with thumb between index and medius. At ordinary mass it is only necessary to commemorate those whose names are italicized, with wording as is shown.)

Laotze and Siddartha and Krishna *and Tahuti,* Mosheh, *Dionysus, Mohammed and To Mega Therion, with these also* Hermes, *Pan,* Priapus, Osiris and Melchizedek, *Khem* and Amoun *and Mentu, Heracles,* Orpheus and Odysseus; with Vergilius, *Catullus,* Martialis, *Rabelais, Swinburne, and many an holy bard; Apollonius Tyanæus,* Simon Magus, Manes, *Pythagoras,* Basilides, Valentinus, *Bardesanes and Hippolytus, that transmitted the Light of the Gnosis to us their successors and their heirs;* with Merlin, Arthur, Kamuret, Parzival, and many another, prophet, priest and king, that bore the Lance and Cup, the Sword and Disk, against the Heathen; *and these also,* Carolus Magnus and his paladins, with William of Schyren, Frederick of Hohenstaufen, Roger Bacon, *Jacobus Burgundus Molensis the Martyr, Christian Rosencreutz,* Ulrich von Hutten, Paracelsus, Michael Maier, *Roderic Borgia Pope Alexander the Sixth,* Jacob Boehme, Francis Bacon Lord Verulam, Andrea, Robertus de Fluctibus, Giordano Bruno, Johannes Dee, *Sir Edward Kelly,* Thomas Vaughan, Elias Ashmole, Molinos, Adam Weishaupt, Wolfgang von Goethe, William Blake, Ludovicus Rex Bavariæ, Richard Wagner, Ludwig von Fischer, *Alphonse Louis Constant,* Friedrich Nietzsche, Hargrave Jennings, Carl Kellner, Forlong dux, Sir Richard Payne Knight, Paul Gaugin, Sir Richard Francis Burton, Doctor Gérard Encausse, *Doctor Theodor Reuss, Sir Aleister Crowley, Karl Johannes Germer, and Major Grady Louis McMurtry*— Oh Sons of the Lion and the Snake! with all thy saints we worthily commemorate them worthy that were and are and are to come.

May their Essence be here present, potent, puissant and paternal to perfect this feast!

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

The Earth

The DEACON: Mother of fertility on whose breast lieth water, whose cheek is caressed by air, and in whose heart is the sun's fire, womb of all life, recurring grace of seasons, answer favorably the prayer of labour, and to pastors and husbandmen be thou propitious.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

The Principles

The DEACON: Mysterious Energy, triform, mysterious Matter, in fourfold and sevenfold division, the interplay of which things weave the dance of the Veil of Life upon

the Face of the Spirit, let there be Harmony and Beauty in your mystic loves, that in us may be health and wealth and strength and divine pleasure according to the Law of Liberty; let each pursue his Will as a strong man that rejoiceth in his way, as the course of a Star that blazeth for ever among the joyous company of Heaven.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

Birth

The DEACON: Be the hour auspicious, and the gate of life open in peace and in well-being, so that she that beareth children may rejoice, and the babe catch life with both hands.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

Marriage

The DEACON: Upon all that this day unite with love under will let fall success; may strength and skill unite to bring forth ecstasy, and beauty answer beauty.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

Death

The DEACON: Term of all that liveth, whose name is inscrutable, be favourable unto us in thine hour.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

The End

The DEACON: Unto them from whose eyes the veil of life hath fallen may there be granted the accomplishment of their true Wills; whether they will absorption in the Infinite, or to be united with their chosen and preferred, or to be in contemplation, or to be at peace, or to achieve the labour and heroism of incarnation on this planet or another, or in any Star, or aught else, unto them may there be granted the accomplishment of their Wills; yea, the accomplishment of their Wills. ’ΆΥΜΓΝ. ’ΆΥΜΓΝ. ’ΆΥΜΓΝ.

The PEOPLE: So mote it be.

All sit.

The DEACON and the children attend the PRIEST and PRIESTESS, ready to hold any appropriate weapon as may be necessary.

VI
Of the Consecration of the Elements

The PRIEST makes the five crosses

☩1

☩3 ☩2

on paten and cup; ☩4 on paten alone; ☩5 on cup alone.

The PRIEST: Life of man upon earth, fruit of labour, sustenance of endeavour, thus be thou nourishment of the Spirit!

He touches the Host with the Lance.

By the virtue of the Rod
Be this bread the Body of God!

He takes the Host.

ΤΟΥΤΟ ΄ΕΣΤΙ ΤΟ ΣΩΜΑ ΜΟΥ.

He kneels, adores, rises, turns, shows Host to the PEOPLE, turns, replaces Host, and adores. Music. He takes the Cup.

Vehicle of the joy of Man upon earth, solace of labour, inspiration of endeavour, thus be thou ecstasy of the Spirit!

He touches the Cup with the Lance.

By the virtue of the Rod
Be this wine the Blood of God!

He takes the Cup.

ΤΟΥΤΟ ΄ΕΣΤΙ ΤΟ ΠΟΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΤΟΥ ΄ΑΙΜΑΤΟΣ ΜΟΥ.

He kneels, adores, rises, turns, shows the Cup to the PEOPLE, turns, replaces the Cup, and adores. Music.

For this is the Covenant of Resurrection.

He makes the five crosses on the PRIESTESS.

Accept, O LORD, this sacrifice of life and joy, true warrants of the Covenant of Resurrection.

The PRIEST offers the Lance to the PRIESTESS, who kisses it; he then touches her between the breasts and upon the body. He then flings out his arms upward, as comprehending the whole shrine.

Let this offering be borne upon the waves of Aethyr to our Lord and Father the Sun that travelleth over the Heavens in his name ON.

He closes his hands, kisses the PRIESTESS between the breasts, and makes three great crosses over the Paten, the Cup, and himself. He strikes his breast. All repeat this action.

Hear ye all, saints of the true church of old time now essentially present, that of ye we claim heirship, with ye we claim communion, from ye we claim benediction in the name of ’IAΩ.

He makes three crosses on Paten and Cup together. He uncovers the Cup, genuflects, takes the Cup in his left hand and the Host in his right. With the Host he makes the five crosses on the Cup.

☩1
☩3 ☩2
☩5 ☩4

He elevates the Host and the Cup. The Bell strikes.

῾ΑΓΙΟΣ ῾ΑΓΙΟΣ ῾ΑΓΙΟΣ ’ΙΑΩ.

He replaces the Host and the Cup, and adores.

VII
Of the Office of the Anthem

The PRIEST:

Thou who art I, beyond all I am,
Who hast no nature and no name,
Who art, when all but thou are gone,
Thou, centre and secret of the Sun,

Thou, hidden spring of all things known
And unknown, Thou aloof, alone,
Thou, the true fire within the reed
Brooding and breeding, source and seed
Of life, love, liberty, and light,
Thou beyond speech and beyond sight,
Thee I invoke, my faint fresh fire
Kindling as mine intents aspire.
Thee I invoke, abiding one,
Thee, centre and secret of the Sun,
And that most holy mystery
Of which the vehicle am I.
Appear, most awful and most mild,
As it is lawful, in thy child!

The CHORUS:

For of the Father and the Son
The Holy Spirit is the norm;
Male-female, quintessential, one,
Man-being veiled in woman-form.
Glory and worship in the highest,
Thou Dove, mankind that deifiest,
Being that race, most royally run
To spring sunshine through winter storm.
Glory and worship be to Thee,
Sap of the world-ash, wonder-tree!

First Semichorus, MEN:

Glory to thee from gilded tomb!

Second Semichorus, WOMEN:

Glory to thee from waiting womb!

MEN:

Glory to Thee from earth unploughed!

WOMEN:

Glory to Thee from virgin vowed!

MEN:

Glory to Thee, true Unity
Of the Eternal Trinity!

WOMEN:

Glory to Thee, thou sire and dam
And Self of I am that I am!

MEN:

Glory to Thee, beyond all term,
Thy spring of sperm, thy seed and germ!

WOMEN:

Glory to Thee, eternal Sun,
Thou One in Three, Thou Three in One!

CHORUS:

Glory and worship unto Thee,
Sap of the world-ash, wonder-tree!

(These words are to form the substance of the anthem; but the whole or any part thereof shall be set to music, which may be as elaborate as art can devise. But even should other anthems be authorized by the Father of the Church, this shall hold its place as the first of its kind, the father of all others.)

VIII
Of the Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements

The PRIEST takes the Paten between the index and medius of the right hand. The PRIESTESS clasps the Cup in her right hand.

The PRIEST: Lord most secret, bless this spiritual food unto our bodies, bestowing upon us health and wealth and strength and joy and peace, and that fulfilment of will and of love under will that is perpetual happiness.

He makes ☩ with Paten and kisses it. He uncovers the Cup, genuflects, rises. Music. He takes the Host, and breaks it over the Cup. He replaces the right-hand portion in the Paten. He breaks off a particle of the left-hand portion.

ΤΟΥΤΟ ᾽ΕΣΤΙ ΤΟ ΣΠΕΡΜΑ ΜΟΥ. ῾Ο ΠΑΤΗΡ ᾽ΕΣΤΙΝ ῾Ο ῾ΗΥΙΟΣ ΔΙΑ ΤΟ ΠΝΕΥΜΑ ῾ΑΓΙΟΝ. ᾽ΑΥΜΓΝ. ᾽ΑΥΜΓΝ. ᾽ΑΥΜΓΝ.

He replaces the left-hand part of the Host. The PRIESTESS extends the Lance-point with her left hand to receive the particle. The PRIEST clasps the Cup in his left hand. Together they depress the Lance-point in the Cup.

The PRIEST and the PRIESTESS: ΗΡΙΛΙΥ.

The PRIEST takes the Lance. The PRIESTESS covers the Cup. The PRIEST genuflects, rises, bows, joins hands. He strikes his breast.

The PRIEST:

O Lion and O Serpent that destroy the destroyer, be mighty among us.
O Lion and O Serpent that destroy the destroyer, be mighty among us.
O Lion and O Serpent that destroy the destroyer, be mighty among us.

The PRIEST joins hands upon the breast of the PRIESTESS, and takes back his Lance. He turns to the People, lowers and raises the Lance, and makes ☥ upon them.

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.

The PEOPLE: Love is the law, love under will.

He lowers the Lance, and turns to East. The PRIESTESS takes the Lance in her right hand; with her left hand she offers the Paten. The PRIEST kneels.

The PRIEST: In my mouth be the essence of the life of the Sun!

He takes the Host with the right hand, makes ☥ with it on the Paten, and consumes it. Silence. The PRIESTESS takes, uncovers, and offers the Cup, as before.

The PRIEST: In my mouth be the essence of the joy of the earth!

He takes the Cup, makes ☥ on the PRIESTESS, drains it, and returns it.

Silence. He rises, takes the Lance, and turns to the PEOPLE.

The PRIEST: There is no part of me that is not of the Gods.

(Those of the PEOPLE who intend to communicate, and none other should be present, having signified their intention, a whole Cake of Light, and a whole goblet of wine, have been prepared for each one. The DEACON marshals them; they advance one by one to the altar. The children take the Elements and offer them. The PEOPLE communicate as

did the PRIEST, uttering the same words in an attitude of Resurrection: "There is no part of me that is not of the Gods." The exceptions to this part of the ceremony are when it is of the nature of a celebration, in which case none but the PRIEST communicate; or part of the ceremony of marriage, when none other, save the two to be married, partake; part of the ceremony of baptism, when only the child baptised partakes; and of Confirmation at puberty, when only the persons confirmed partake. The Sacrament may be reserved by the PRIEST, for administration to the sick in their homes.

The PRIEST closes all within the veil. With the Lance he makes ☩ on the people thrice, thus.

The PRIEST:

☩ The LORD bless you.

☩ The LORD enlighten your minds and comfort your hearts and sustain your bodies.

☩ The LORD bring you to the accomplishment of your true Wills, the Great Work, the Summum Bonum, True Wisdom and Perfect Happiness.

He goes out, the DEACON and children following, into the Tomb of the West.

Music. (Voluntary.)

NOTE: The PRIESTESS and other officers never partake of the Sacrament, they being as it were part of the PRIEST himself.

NOTE: Certain secret formulæ of this Mass are taught to the PRIEST in his Ordination.

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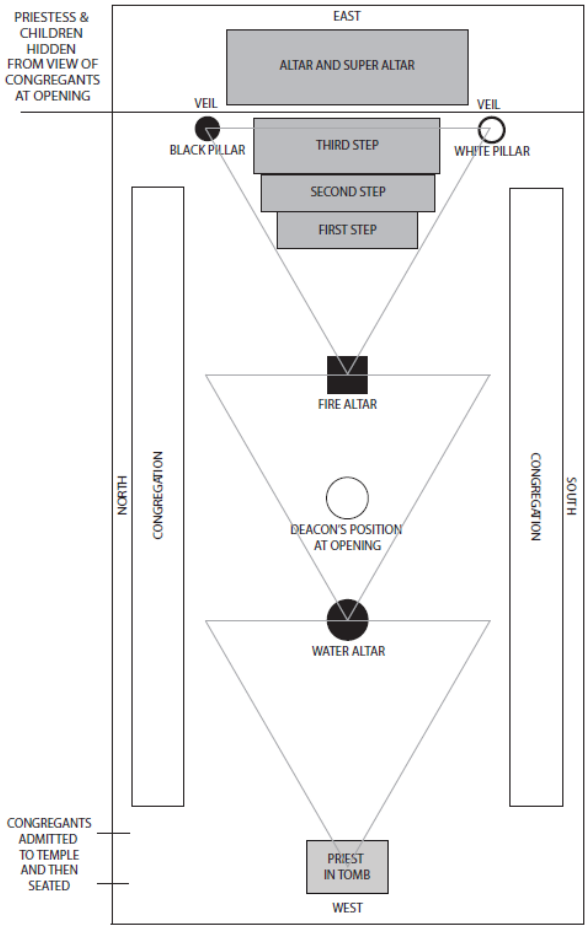
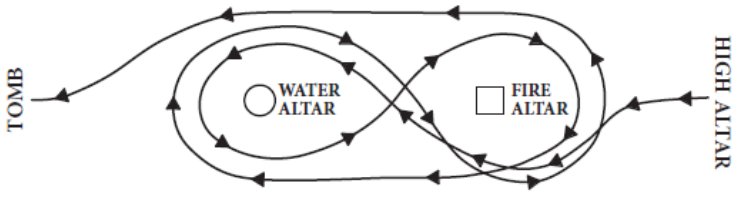
Appendix B: Floor Chart and Serpentine Path



The Temple at the Opening of the Ritual

[1]



[2]

[1] Reproduced with permission from James and Nancy Wasserman, *To Perfect this Feast: A Performance Commentary on the Gnostic Mass* (Sekmet Books, 2013), 52, image.

[2] Reproduced with permission from James and Nancy Wasserman, *To Perfect this Feast: A Performance Commentary on the Gnostic Mass* (Sekmet Books, 2013), 61, image.

Appendix C: Lodge Altar & the Stele of Revealing

1

2

According to Helena and Tau Apiryon:

> The Stele of Revealing is the funeral tablet of Ankh-f-n-Khonsu, a Priest of Monthu who lived in Thebes during the late XXVth dynasty of ancient Egypt, around 725 b.c.e. Crowley and his wife Rose encountered this artifact, labeled as "Stele 666", in the Boulak Museum of Cairo shortly after the Equinox of the Gods in March, 1904 e.v. This encounter was one of several important events leading to the reception of *The Book of the Law* on April 8, 9, and 10, 1904 e.v. (See *Book 4*, Part IV). According to Aleister Crowley's mythic story, "Across the Gulf," Ankh-af-na-Khonsu was responsible for ushering in the Aeon of Osiris. Aleister Crowley assumed the magical identity of the dead man Ankh-af-na-Khonsu as the living Prophet of the Aeon of Horus, the deliverer of *The Book of the Law*. The Stele thus represents the oracular connection of *The Book of the Law* and the Law of Thelema with the archaic energies of ancient Egypt, transformed and renewed in accordance with the cyclic pattern of aeonic evolution.[3]

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[1] Reproduced with permission from Illia Tulloch, GnosticMass.Org, last accessed September 29, 2014, http://www.gnosticmass.org/, image.

[2] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass: Annotations and Commentary by Helena and Tau Apiryon," The Invisible Basilica of Sabazius. Last Accessed September 29, 2104, http://hermetic.com/sabazius/gmnotes.htm#stele, image.

[3] Helena and Tau Apiryon, "The Gnostic Mass," 3.